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THE
VAN HAAVENS
—
C. HILTON-TURVEY



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THE VAN HAAVENS



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They slipped out, without having been observed, and gave themselves to the crystal night

See page 246

THE VAN HAAVENS

BY
C. HILTON-TURVEY

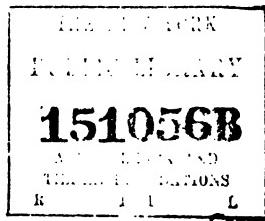
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
H. R. BALLINGER



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DEDICATED TO
MY BEST FRIEND, T. H-T.

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THE VAN HAAVENS

CHAPTER I

That youth is happy is supposedly an axiom. In reality it is only a platitude. No sorrow cuts so deep as in the late teens or the early twenties. For youth has no horizons, no perspective. No boredom is so intolerable. For youth has no resources in itself. The plaint of the small child, "I don't know what to do, Mother!" lessens with the march of the years. At middle age one must make careful choice of the many interesting things to be done — the multitude of pleasures to be enjoyed, with the limited time and energy at one's command.

Willoughby Van Haaven — young, tolerably good-looking and the probable heir to wealth — was excessively bored.

Now when one is bored with any certain thing, it is possible to escape that thing and move on to a pleasanter phase of existence. But when boredom spreads itself over everything in heaven and earth and the waters under the earth, it becomes a serious matter, not to say a desperate.

Van Haaven was no student. His second term at college was interesting him no more than had the previous term. And how he had managed to make the necessary points to pass his examinations was a mystery to his professors, and no less to himself.

He had no special gift for the friendships that are, to most men, so large a part of college life. He had no saving hobby, no trend toward dissipation. He was moderately fond of athletics — from the grandstand. But as for the grind of training and all that muscular fitness implies — it was too much trouble. Little wonder that time hung like lead on his hands.

He sat gazing moodily out of his window one evening early in spring, nursing one slim, well-bred ankle over the other knee.

A group of college men strolled across the campus. One sang snatches of a popular song in a high thin tenor, while the others contributed such harmony as they saw fit, in voices varying from second tenor down to rumbling basso-profundo.

Willoughby watched them, enviously. They, evidently, were not bored.

They passed out under the high, stone gateway. Their singing died away in the distance.

Some one rattled at the knob of his door.

Willoughby rose and opened it.

A young man stood there, half-dressed.

"Say, Van Haaven," he began, "you haven't got a white tie you could lend me, have you?"

"Top drawer of the chiffonnier," Willoughby responded, with a gesture in the direction of that article of furniture. "Help yourself, Harvey."

"I spoiled the last one I had," the other went on, rummaging in the drawer. He picked out several and scrutinized them for a choice. "You've got oodles of 'em. Mind if I took more than one? I always make a foozle tying the first one or two."



"Take the drawerful if you want," Willoughby invited him, languidly. "Anything so special on for tonight?"

Harvey grinned. "Only a burlesque show—'Diamond Dust'—and some of us fellows are going to take the prettiest girls out to supper afterwards. Some ripping little flappers in the outfit. And nice too—not the ordinary flim-flam kind." He shut the drawer and made for the door.

On the threshold he paused, the ties dangling over his arm. "Say, Van Haaven, won't you come along?"

Willoughby considered a moment. "Why, yes," he acquiesced, "I don't mind—if there's room for one more."

An hour later, he, too, passed under the high, stone gateway, en route to the center of the town, with a crowd of young fellows who, if not more than ordinarily congenial, were at least preferable to his own moody thoughts.

"Diamond Dust" proved to be the usual burlesque confection, with frothy songs, shrill-voiced repartee, and the pleasing demonstration of feminine anatomy.

Van Haaven sat wearily through it all. It seemed even a deadlier bore than staying at home would have been. He began to wish he had not come.

Later, however, when the show was ended, the interesting part of the evening arrived. The supper was good—this always counted with a Van Haaven—and the girl who fell to his escort was a vivacious little thing. She kept Willoughby amused by her naïve impudence. The men were on their good behavior, for the place was a smart café above the usual type.

As they sat chatting and eating, one of the professors

came in and, passing their table, looked keenly at the group. He saw nothing but a dozen pretty girls, fashionably gowned, at supper with a like number of students, all gaily chattering like sparrows in a tree.

Soon the party broke up, and the girls were safely escorted to their hotel.

So far, it was so good. But it happened that a certain few of the men were not content to let well enough alone. A bibulous mood seized them on the way home — a mood they indulged to its fullest, with the inevitable result. They were in a dangerously playful state of mind when, in the small hours, they reached the dormitories.

Hazily in his dreams, Willoughby — who had turned in long before — heard sounds of breaking glass — of heavy furniture — of hilarious shouts.

At last, broad awake, he got up and went to the window.

Below, a group of men were moving drunkenly about, wreaking all the damage upon the dormitories that the remnant of their minds suggested. Broken glass glittered on the pavement in the dim light. The ivy under the windows along the wall had been torn down and trampled.

Van Haaven had no difficulty in recognizing them as some of his companions of the earlier evening. His vis-à-vis of the supper table — ordinarily a mild-mannered youth — leaned against the iron railing in a paroxysm of laughter, the foolish merriment of a man who was — to put it conservatively — not quite himself.

The windows of Van Haaven's rooms were fortunately in an angle away from the light, and, therefore, were untouched. For the same reason he was able to watch the men unobserved.

Presently they veered off across the quadrangle, shout-

ing and singing as they went in search of more damage to do.

It transpired the next day, that the students responsible for the mischief were in for at least a serious rebuke. The previous term had been disgraced by rowdyism amongst an unfavored few, and the University authorities were resolved to put a firm foot down upon the next demonstration. This was it. They at once began an investigation.

As usual in such cases, no one of the students knew anything of the affair. Even those in the dormitories, whose property had suffered, were quite unaware of the modus of the wreck — still more stoutly of the identity of the perpetrators.

But some untoward chance — with the stern assistance of the professor who had seen the men earlier in the evening at the café — connected them with the rowdyism of the later hour.

All the men who had been of the party were called upon for evidence, Van Haaven amongst the number. When that evidence was not forthcoming, the entire group was first suspended — later expelled. The innocent suffered with the guilty, and some fantastic notion of honor closed the mouths of the few who had had nothing to do with the prank and kept them loyal. It is true they had their own opinion of the men for whose fault they suffered and who would not say the word that would clear them.

As for the guilty ones, they had the faint hope of future reinstatement. This was their excuse for silence — if excuse there could be.

Willoughby cursed the impulse that had led him to join

the party — better boredom than disgrace. It was one thing to beseech his uncle, as he had intended, to dispense with the college course as part of his education — and quite another thing to be invited to leave college as an undesirable member. He anticipated a bad quarter of an hour with Uncle Pemberton.

In this he was not disappointed. His subsequent interview was a painful one. And his code of honor did not permit him — even under the seal of secrecy — to inform his relative how little he was to blame in the matter. As it was, he had lost out, and he was determined to take the consequences without complaint or excuse. His uncle believed the worst of him. And he read his nephew a not inconsiderable lecture on the blood and treasure he had expended on him, and the evil of Willoughby's ingratitude.

Now young Van Haaven had always chafed against the atmosphere of his uncle's home. He felt a certain resentment for his mother's sake — dead she was long since. His aunts had the bad habit of hinting that she was not quite the equal of Willoughby's father, their youngest brother Raymond. In their estimate, "poor Raymond" had been sacrificed.

Wealthy as were the Van Haavens, they attached themselves ardently to their money. They were not of a generous nature. And from the time they took "poor Raymond's children," shortly before his death, up to the present moment, their left hand was in constant communication with their right.

Willoughby, in particular, was never long in ignorance as to the amount his relatives were spending upon him. Inwardly he resented it. But his passive exterior hid his

feelings so successfully that his uncle had only the vaguest notion of them.

Now some people have rich red blood of a temperature that occasionally rises to boiling point; and of a swiftness rivalling the mountain stream. Other folks have a fairly temperate concoction that flows serenely — like a sun-warmed creek through a meadow. The Van Haaven life current had been cooled by a long period of prosperity till it crept decorously in their veins — ice water with a tinge of bluing in it. The Van Haavens based their claim to high-bred ancestry on four generations of solid material wealth and the standing thus given to them in the community. They had lived and died placidly, drugged into serenity by the wealth that made it unnecessary for them to bestir themselves. They were sluggish mentally, for they spent their dividends solely for material comfort. They grew old and heavy-jowled enjoying themselves. A Dutch grocer lurked in their family tree, the actual founder of the Van Haaven fortune. The present generation of Van Haavens avoided mention of the thrifty vendor of sugar and cheese — avoided even the silent contemplation of him, much as a super-modest person might avoid the humiliating thought that he had been born naked.

The news of Willoughby's misconduct was received with chilly disgust by his aunts, Harriet and Edwina, and his uncle Cyril. (The Van Haavens ran notably to ornamental names unabbreviated.) To them it was only one more instance of their nephew's ingratitude for past favors.

Pemberton took the affair more easily. He was even relieved to reflect that now his nephew might be taught to

take a hand in the management of the family business. The responsibility weighed heavily on him sometimes. His younger brother Cyril lived only to amuse himself, and, since his peculiar temperament was a difficult one to amuse, he naturally devoted his entire time to the matter.

Pemberton, who was very conscientious, now gave Willoughby his choice of going to another college, or learning the business in which much of the family money was invested. To his surprise, the young man declined both. He had — so he said — plans of his own.

His uncle suggested dryly that his nephew should consider the fact that he had no means, since his late father had squandered his own fortune, leaving Willoughby and his sister Allaine to be brought up by the family. This was an unfortunate allusion. The life-long sting was in it, felt all the more at this juncture. Yet it was perfectly natural that Uncle Pemberton should mention the money it had taken to bring him up thus far. To the Van Haavens money was the first of the great facts of life; birth and breeding was the second; eternal salvation was the third.

Willoughby's long, dark face flushed, but he said nothing. Probably his uncle Pemberton took his silence for agreement.

The next day he knew better.

Willoughby had disappeared. He left a note saying that he was going to make his own way. He would write to them again when he had succeeded — not before.

Then, indeed, there was something as near consternation as the sluggish Van Haaven temperament could get up at such short notice. For Willoughby was the one and only heir to the glories of the family — the only man

to carry the name of Van Haaven down to posterity!

It had dire results — this breaking away of the scion of the house of Van Haaven. In the months that they sought him, Pemberton grayed rapidly and lost money in the stock market. Miss Edwina fell a prey to fainting fits which always, thereafter, came with any call upon her emotions. Miss Harriet suffered a severe attack of nervous dyspepsia, and Cyril forsook the family mansion and lived as far as possible at his clubs, quite unable to stand the gloom.

As for Allaine, Willoughby's only sister, the matter was kept from her — she was at school at the time, and when she returned things were glossed over and evaded till she ceased to ask about her brother. But she confided to her roommate, in a whisper, that Willoughby had "done something perfectly awful!" Whereupon that young lady stole Willoughby's picture from its place on Allaine's mantel shelf and wasted a highly romantic passion on it, till something more mysteriously attractive hove in sight. But of all this, the wandering Willoughby was unaware.

When he made his stealthy exit from the front door at about four in the morning, he bore with him only the remnant of his month's allowance. This remnant he expended in railway fare, with the object of putting as much distance as possible between him and his family. He never doubted his ability to fill his purse at the end of his journey. It is true, he did not know how he would turn the trick — but that was a mere detail. That is, it was a mere detail until he arrived at Chicago one wet day and began to look around him for a breakfast.

While he slept the previous night, some predatory animal of the genus *homo* had slipped away with his suit

case from under the berth and the umbrella strapped outside, likewise his overcoat. So the rain that falls on the just and the unjust in such cases, descended and soaked Willoughby, till he looked as never a Van Haaven had looked for several generations.

In his normal attire he might have had a chance at a position. But after a day of dampness, and a night spent in the open park on a phenomenally hard bench, to say nothing of an enforced fast, Willoughby looked like a hand-me-down on a considerable spree.

When he advanced upon the mid-western metropolis lolling in the luxurious Pullman, Willoughby had turned over in his mind the things of which he felt himself capable — private secretaryship to a man of affairs — there was a career in that if managed properly — one got in with influential people and rose, if one had the knack. But after going without breakfast and getting sopped, Willoughby fancied it would be best to defer the call upon the man of affairs until his suit was pressed and he had had a square meal. To get this he would better descend — merely for the moment — to some immediately remunerative employment — say bookkeeping. Willoughby had never studied it, but he knew he could do it if he tried.

Subsequent trials convinced him that Chicago was extraordinarily well supplied with bookkeepers — to the point of insolence, in fact, judging by his reception in office after office. Gradually he had pawned his personal jewelry — sleeve-links, watch, scarf pin and cigarette case. They paid the price of a hall room in a dingy boarding house, while he looked about for means of retrieving them. Presently, the small fund came to an

end. So did the landlady's stock of patience after two weeks without payment from her new lodger.

The end of a few weeks found the pampered member of the house of Van Haaven haunting the railway stations on the lookout — whisper it! — for baggage to carry (when the porters were not in sight). And on Willoughby's lean, dark face there was an expression of the most acute surprise, that, in fact, never quite left it, even in after years.

Columbus discovered a continent — but he was looking for it. Young Van Haaven ran across a number of extraordinary things without looking for them at all. One was, that even when the porters had chased him to the portals of the station, there were still other men who resented his presence in a business way, quite outside of the porters' territory. These, not content with haughty commands when he sought to ply the only occupation open to him, gathered in force and sought to mangle his anatomy with rude blows and unvarnished language. It was, in fact, a sort of union Willoughby was "up against" — a union whose brotherly feelings moved in a small and exclusive circle and did not yearn to include alien newcomers.

So it happened that one fine afternoon toward the end of May, Willoughby found himself lounging on a bench in the park, homeless, friendless, dinnerless. He felt the bench hard under him and thrust out his long legs to ease himself. At that moment a man shambled towards the bench. Willoughby's feet caught him unaware and he stumbled and nearly fell.

"Excuse me!" Willoughby murmured mechanically.

"W'y cert, ol' pal!" the tramp replied, good-naturedly, and sat himself down beside the young man.

A long string of people passed by — women with baby carriages, groups of young girls chattering on their way from school, sprucely dressed clerks, old men tottering by on canes —

The tramp seemed to regard the passing scene as his special picture book. A highly satisfactory one, since it involved not even the trouble of turning the leaves. Anon, he turned his gaze cautiously on the man by his side. Even in the ranks of those who recline on park benches, there is a code of manners. Open curiosity is not good form. If one gazes too markedly, one is liable to have a rude inquiry hurled at one —“Wa’cher lookin’ at?” or even to leave the scene in haste with one orb out of commission.

So the tramp made his observation as unobtrusively as possible. But soon he saw that his caution was wasted on the gloomy young man. He stared straight ahead of him — unseeing. The tramp sized him up —“a swell out of a job” — and he blinked kindly at him out of his bleary eyes.

But of this the despondent Willoughby was quite unaware.

The string of passersby diminished — dwindled to ones and twos — far between. People were going home to supper. A couple of loafers on an adjoining bench yawned, stretched themselves, and rising, slouched to a chance meal. The sun declined on the horizon — a red ball in a cloud of dust. The bright, sparse green of the springtime trees grayed with the coming twilight. An evening chill began to creep into the air from over the lake.

Willoughby stirred uneasily.

The tramp coughed unobtrusively. He edged nearer. "Gittin' chilly," he remarked at last.

Willoughby roused himself. "Yes," he responded and fell again into silence. But the tramp had gauged him as unlikely to be aggressive, should he carry out the impulse that stirred in him. Even tramps may have philanthropic leanings.

"Supper?" he asked of Willoughby, leering not unkindly.

Willoughby shook his head.

"Young feller," the tramp began in his husky voice, "take a hunch from a fly guy as hoofed the trail when youse was cuttin' yer front spikes — never go widout, w'en youse kin graft fur eats."

Willoughby moved restlessly. He was hungry. But he said nothing.

The tramp eyed him a moment, then resumed. "I'm wise t'a free lunch — 'tain't fur. Come on!" He nudged the young man in a friendly fashion.

Willoughby looked around. He saw a dirty face with a week's stubble on it, a face wrinkled with wind and weather till it looked like a piece of wet leather that had dried in the sun. Wisps of hair straggled from beneath the ragged cap. But the tramp had eyes like an honest dog's — brown, with a touch of fun in them.

The eyes won out.

"All right," Willoughby responded, rising. Anything was better than sitting there on the hard bench — hungry and chilled. Instinctively he looked around for possible observers.

The tramp spat expansively on the path, then rose and shuffled along beside the young man. He had seen de-

spair before. He knew the signs. He gauged Willoughby to a dot—"a hell of a swell in a strange bunk, an' down an' out, so he can't come back nohow." He felt the pleasing glow that a Carnegie knows when he donates a library to a town. He began to talk to the man who walked beside him, expecting no answer. The small talk of tramp folk is not unlike that of polite society. The weather led, of course. He had "hit the ties clear from St. Paul las' fall, an' got purty near browned on both sides—no rain fur mos' six weeks. An' w'en it begun t' git cold, blame if she didn't come down in buckets every day fur a month stiddy. Had t' stop off'n' git dried up every night—gosh! D'j'veer see sich a rotten deal!"

No, Willoughby hadn't. He contributed the fact that he had been caught himself the first day he came to Chicago.

The tramp surveyed his companion's wrinkled clothes. He clucked his sympathy.

Under the influence of his cheering conversation Willoughby straightened up and looked more like himself. He was advancing upon a meal of some sort. That thought was invigorating.

The tramp trotted to keep up with him.

Presently the philanthropist broke off and began to peer furtively about. They had turned into a place of wholesale houses, deserted at this hour, the rubbish of the day making the street look as if some sort of battle had taken place there.

"Keep yer lamps peeled fur the cops," the tramp advised huskily, "but don't run if they sh'd pipe you first—then ye'd git pinched sure. It's like cats 'n dogs. If

Mrs. Miaow sets up on th' fence quiet, 'n blinks, why the mutt goes by 'n no damage did. But if she starts to run, you bet she gits all that's makin' fur her — 'n that's God's truth!"

Willoughby nodded thoughtfully. He was making a desperate effort to adjust himself to circumstances. At college the cops were usually amenable to the process of crossing their palms with currency. They were feared by none but the impecunious. He had never given them a thought. Now —

The tramp peered cautiously round a corner, stretching his thin yellow neck like a turtle. He made a gesture of his thumb over his shoulder.

Now Willoughby might have expected almost anything to heave in sight when he turned the corner — a cosy little restaurant — a lunch wagon — anything, in fact, but what he saw — the rear of a produce place, strewn with the remnants of the day's business — cabbage leaves; the discards from potato baskets; little hard Southern tomatoes, considerably battered; oranges, apples and bananas, all seemingly past use.

Willoughby gazed about him with distaste. He was orderly by nature. As yet, it had not dawned upon him why the tramp had brought him there, or why he was hurrying hither and thither, stopping now and then, to burrow in the heaps, like a dog after an elusive rat. Presently, he came toward Willoughby, his pockets bulging, his cheeks likewise.

He held out a couple of mushy bananas toward the young man. "Help yerself, pard!" he mumbled genially.

Willoughby stared. He made no movement to take the fruit. The tramp misunderstood. "Apples?" he

asked hospitably, and reaching into his pocket, he took out three shabby specimens and thrust them into Willoughby's hand. "Eat hearty!" he said.

Then Willoughby comprehended. "Oh!" he commented. He stood there holding the apples as if he did not know how to get rid of them. "Oh!" he said again.

The tramp made his way through the rubbish to a couple of empty crates. He sat down, and rubbing an apple off on his sleeve, bit into it with relish. Then beyond speech for the moment, he patted the seat beside him as an invitation to his companion.

Willoughby seated himself carefully, still holding the apples. He looked like one in a bad dream and conscious of it.

"Great, ain't it?" the tramp chuckled, with a gesture of the hand that still held the mushy bananas to the scattered heaps about them. "I ain't never ben druv off'n here but onst — 'n then I had me pockets filled a'ready!" He looked triumphantly at Willoughby over the round of a distempered apple.

Willoughby was speechless.

"Hey!" said his companion, in surprise. "T'ought youse was nippy fur a bite t' eat?"

Willoughby shook his head. "I — I — don't like — fruit," he admitted, with a little shudder.

The tramp shrugged his seedy shoulders. He went on eating with a slushy noise. It made Willoughby ill. He began to wonder how he should rid himself of this nauseous person.

"Well," he said, at last, rising and casting a look about him, "I'd better be going."

The tramp grinned. "Where?" he asked, simply.

Van Haaven blushed in the dark. He was floored by the question. His wit was not of the quick type that easily gets its owner out of tight places. Also, he was truthful. He had never troubled to be otherwise, not for virtue's sake, but because he could never think up the proper lie for the moment.

"Where?" repeated his host.

Willoughby sat down again as if someone had pulled his feet from under him. "Wish I knew," he replied, hopelessly.

The tramp finished his last banana, tossed the skin at a fleeing rat, just visible in the light from the corner, licked his fingers thoroughly and lingeringly, before he turned to the young fellow beside him. "Perhaps I kin tell yer," he announced genially. "This here's only the fust round. I just happen to have a nickel an' a copper that wuz lef' me by me father's maiden uncle." He nudged Willoughby confidentially. "Come on, we kin git a roll 'n a cup o' dope fur three coppers apiece — if youse don't keer fur fruit!" He got on his feet, as he spoke, and, looking cautiously about, dived into his pocket and brought up six cents. He held it out on his grubby palm for Willoughby to see, then pocketing it, beckoned the young man to follow him.

Willoughby picked his way through the wet rubbish, keeping close to the tramp. Little as he had stomached the decaying fruit, coffee and rolls sounded good to him. He followed up one street and down another, till they came to a dingy eating-house down one short flight to a basement. The tramp flung open the door and saw Willoughby safely in before he entered. The Carnegie impulse still stirred in him and he did not propose that the

young man should escape till he had proved what lay within his power as a host.

The odor in the tiny place was overpowering, made up of the odors of rancid grease and stale cooking. But it did smell of coffee. Willoughby followed the tramp to the counter like a lamb and perched on a stool.

The tramp gave his order. Two steaming cups of an amazing thickness were set down before them. The mixture was not bad — though equally, not coffee. After the chill of outdoors, it was welcome to both of them, and the scion of the house of Van Haaven had not known that he could so enjoy a butterless roll.

The tramp finished with the expedition of a dog with a chunk of meat. He pulled a cigar stub from his pocket, lighted it at the fuse, and sat smoking. He radiated content.

Willoughby finished the last crumb of the roll, the last mouthful of the near-coffee, and reached absently for his napkin. Then remembering the limitations of the place, he drew out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth.

"What's yer name, when y're t'hum?" the tramp asked.

Willoughby opened his lips to reply, then shut them and considered. "Smith," he replied briefly. The thoroughbred was learning.

The tramp twinkled. "Johnnie, I give a guess," he added.

Willoughby nodded.

The tramp whacked him genially on the back. "Schmitty it is!" he said heartily. "They call me Sammy the Simp," he declared. "An' ye'll know why as

you go along, pard." He slid down off the stool with a chuckle and dived through the door.

Willoughby hesitated a moment. He felt no shame in being indebted to Sammy the Simp. He came of a stock that had fattened on the lower classes. Feudalism was in his blood. But now he wished no more of the tramp. His chances were infinitesimal enough without lessening them by disreputable associations. Still, he did not know his way back to the park — the tramp did. He walked slowly up the steps and rejoined Sammy.

Together they went back to the park, like a bench dog and a mongrel.

Sammy chose a secluded bench and sat down, hunching himself against the cool air and turning up the collar of his seedy coat. He had smoked the cigar stub till the thing was no longer possible, so he let it go out and cool a little, then stuffed it into his mouth and used it for a "chew."

Pleasantly replete, he grew reminiscent. Perhaps he meditated a "showdown" to draw his companion to tell something about himself. "I bin on the road ten years er more," he began, nursing one broken boot over the other knee, "n' I never knowed a bum on the trot that wuzn't a-runnin' away from somethin' er somebody. Now ain't that funny?" he asked, turning and looking Willoughby full in the face in the dim light that streamed from a distant arc lamp.

His companion nodded, absently. He was ruminating over his own condition. The affairs of Sammy's friends did not interest him.

"Some runs from work — the most of 'em," Sammy

went on, "an' some from things they done as has giv' 'em a name they can't live down — an' some takes to th' pike 'cause it's a sort of movin' pixture — somethin' doin' all the while. That's the young guys as does that, like kids goin' out t' fight Injuns. I onct knowed a man — he'd saw the daisies come up out of the ground goin' on seventy times. He weren't no Easter chick. Things wuzn't pleasant at home. His son's wife, she nagged him from noon to the next noon. An' his son didn't do nothin' to help him out. No, sir! He sided with th' dame every time. But ol' Methusalem knowed when he'd had enough all right. So one day when she sent him t' the corner store with some small dough t' git her somethin' fur dinner, why he took the trolley instid, an' off he goes ez happy ez a kid on a picnic. They never laid eye on him again, an' if they waited dinner till he come back with th' eats she sent him fur, why they ain't et it yet. He used t' tell me how, when he got t' the end of the trolley, way out in th' country, he giv' a whoop an' began t' run along the road like he wuz a two-year old. Everyone wuz good t' old Rip — the farmers 'u'd give him a handout wherever he ast fur it, an' he slep' in barns an' got a heap of comfort out o' life. Gosh! he never got jawed at again, an' he died 'bout five years later with a smile on 'is ol' mug as must a' went clean through t' the bone."

Sammy looked sideways at his companion, but Wiloughby sat moodily gazing at his boots. He made no comment on the story. It is doubtful if he heard it.

Sammy shifted the pulpy remnant of the cigar from one cheek to the other. "Maybe I don't look like it," he began impressively, "but I'm a guy what left behind a decent home — a industrious wife, an' three — no, four

kids. An' the why thereof wuz this. From the moment I hitched up with Mariar, I felt like a mutt with the distemper. An' plague take me, I didn't know why. Mariar wuz a good housekeeper, an' she stuck round the house like she'd glue on her — never went out gaddin'. If I cud a' picked some faults in her — but, gosh! life run along with Mariar like it wuz a dull game of ball. It wuz strike an' hit an' run — no errors — no fouls — no balls over the fence, an' the ump settin' round doin' nawthin'. Everythin' about th' house went like clock-work," Sammy went on reminiscently, "includin' me."

He glanced at his seatmate. Willoughby appeared to be listening, for the first time, to what he was saying.

"Well," Sammy continued, flattered by his attention, "we added a bran' new kid t' the establishment every year or two. I begun t' hope fur better things. But I soon seen that all th' kids wuz made in Mariar's image — little minnieachurs of her. They wuz stiddy, dead-level an' sot in their ways. They come an' went in the household same as if they had alarm clocks hid in their stum-micks. There wuz times when I'd a' wept with joy if they'd a throwed a plate at me. It wuzn't long before they got my nerve — what little I had left. When I went home from work at night, I uster feel like I wuz movin' round in one of these here Mother Jarley's waxed works. It wuz then I begun t' think of other lands an' other climes. An' one night I sez t'myself, 'What when they all grows up — an' me among 'em?'"

Again he looked around. Willoughby had shifted on the seat and was looking straight at him with an interest he had not shown before. He nodded at Sammy to proceed.

"Now it's easy fur them as has rocks to git divided — as easy as slashin' asunder two links of sausage — as don't hit it off together. But us poor guys is up against it sure when we've drew a blank in the lottery outfit. What show would I stand to go into court neighin' t' be unhitched? I couldn't say Mariar wuz sportin' with other guys, or heavin' furniture at my ivory, or dealin' out crool or unusual treatment. Th' most I cud spiel t' the judge ud a' been behind me hand — 'See here, Ol' man, I've lived alongside of an asbestos female till I'm chilled through. She won't warm up. An' we've a fambly of children as much like wooden ninepins as anythin' y'ever laid yer two lamps upon.' " Sammy chuckled. "I can pictur th' judge bellerin' at me, 'Ye gimblet-eyed ape! Yer wife's too good fur th' likes of you! She ought t' heave plates at yer bonehead!' An' me answerin' him back. 'Plates nawthin'! I wisht she would! But, judge, hark to a poor simp! D'j'ever try t'live with perfection an' survive it?' An' he'd roar out at the orficer, 'Take this here misfit t' th' kennels fur twenty days!' Oh, I thunk it all out at nights with me fambly snoozin' peaceful around me an'—"

A heavy step trod the grass behind them. "Move on!" said a voice with an official tang to it that made Sammy leap out of his seat and take to the path without looking to see the details. Willoughby followed more slowly. They sought out another bench in a darker locality. Rays from the arc lights on the path streamed over the grass and lost themselves in the gloom. The young shrubbery rose vaguely about them. The stars winked overhead, interspersed with little wisps of white cloud. Spring was in the air — a promise of fuller life

— a beginning of change. Willoughby felt its influence. It was as though someone had tapped him on the shoulder and whispered to him to follow.

"Where wuz I at?" Sammy reflected as he seated himself. "Well, there ain't much more t'tell. I lit out one night, carryin' me shoes, havin' shook a by-by at the door to me slumberin' fambly. Outside I set down in the gutter an' put me boots on an' begun to hoof the trail. An' from that time to this I've been as happy as a clam in the suds." He sat still a moment, inviting comment.

Willoughby cleared his throat. It was difficult for him to be communicative. It required a blasting operation somewhere in his interior to enable him to loosen his ideas.

Sammy noted his efforts to be communicative. "An' why did Schmitty leave home?" he asked, in accents intended to be playful.

"Well, I don't know that I could make you understand, Sammy," the young man responded slowly, "but I ran — that is, I left home to get away from money."

The tramp gasped, threw up his hands and fell in a heap in the grass.

Willoughby was aghast. He stooped and felt for the man's heart, wondering what he should do and hoping he was not dead. Too much rotten fruit was his diagnosis.

But Sammy sat up in a moment and looked him in the eye. "Beelzebub's bonnet!" he remarked plaintively. "Don't you spring little tales fur th' young on me without due notice an' process of law. Y' might 'a killed me! Run away from th' rocks, eh!"

"Oh," said the young man, rather stiffly. It dawned on him that Sammy was joking. But whether it was the spring night, or the fact that he had reached rock bottom and was on his way upward, he answered the tramp's twinkle with a slow smile and continued. "I've had money all my life — never knew what it was to do without it till now. But my people have made so much of giving it to me that I wished they hadn't. They didn't seem to understand that a fellow had any pride — just crammed it down my throat. I don't know that you'd know how I felt?" he observed, turning doubtfully to the dimly seen Sammy, sprawling on the other end of the bench.

"You bet!" Sammy declared. "Ain't Mariar give me a handout every Sa'rd'y night from my pay envelope — like I wuz a burglar she wuz a-tryin' t' buy off?"

"Then I got into — well — I had a little trouble at college," Willoughby went on, wondering at himself that he should share his confidence with a waif like Sammy, "and my uncle wanted me to go into his office —"

A dark shadow crept towards their feet. They were too absorbed to notice, till a heavy hand descended on the shoulder of each of them. "Bums!" a fat voice ejaculated contemptuously. "Here's where ye git the run in."

Sammy stood up, blinking. Willoughby sat rooted to the seat.

"Will yez come peaceable, or will ye have me donate yez a black eye apiece?" The officer reached for his night stick, letting go his hold on the shoulder nearest him.

At the same moment, Sammy took to his heels and

melted into the darkness, leaving an irate policeman and a bewildered prisoner gazing after him.

"Bad cess to um!" the officer muttered under his breath. He grabbed Willoughby by the collar. "Come on!" he cried.

Now Willoughby had never known physical coercion. He pulled back viciously. "Take your damned hands off me!" he cried, angrily.

"I will, when I git you where I want you!" the officer returned heatedly. He raised his club threateningly. Before it could descend, Willoughby's long arm shot out and caught it midway. But he had not reckoned on the officer's weight. He looked fat, but there was muscle underneath. A few minutes' struggle showed the younger man that he would get the worst of it. He dropped his arms to his sides. "All right, I'll go with you," he said sulkily.

"You bet y' will!" the officer declared, rudely, and breathing hard he trotted the young man along the path and out of the park, where he rang for a patrol wagon.

CHAPTER II

As one walking the mazes of a nightmare, Willoughby accompanied the officer into the station, and paid his unwilling devoirs to the Sergeant. He blinked when asked his name; but as he had answered Sammy the Simp, so he answered the man of the law — “ John Smith.”

He was thrust into a cell, already crowded with hoboes. The stench was as much as he could endure. For the first few minutes he felt faint with nausea. In the dim light that came from the corridor, he discerned figures like scarecrows out of a field, sitting with their backs to the wall or crouched asleep on the floor. There was too little room for anyone to stretch out. But to Willoughby’s surprise they seemed tolerably cheerful. He had yet to learn how philosophical is the tramp’s outlook upon life — he takes things as they come and doesn’t expect too much.

Several in a group near him conversed in a low tone. Their jargon meant little to him, and he fancied they used as much technical tramp talk as possible to keep him from understanding. Once in a while the guard would walk by in the corridor outside. At such times the conversation would die down till he had passed well out of hearing. Once he swung a lantern across the door of the cell. “ Less noise there! ” he commanded.

Willoughby felt curiously lonesome. And when he came to analyze it, he discovered that he was undoubtedly

missing his host of the early evening. He felt that Sammy the Simp could have been of value to him, if only to warn him of pitfalls. And he smiled contemptuously at himself there in the dark, to think that he had fallen to the level of the lowest thing he knew — a hobo! And even in that humble rôle, he could not be a success without help! It was galling. But he had no thought of returning home. He would go when he had made money enough to take him — not before. His lean, melancholy face set itself like a flint. There must be a place waiting for him — in another town — another state. He would try to get away when he was out of this vile hole.

He clasped his hands round his knees, leaned his head against the wall and lost himself in a bitter reverie. Suddenly, by the mere process of waking, he discovered that he had been asleep. Someone tripped over his feet, someone jerked into the cell by the guard. The barred door shut again with a clang. The lantern of the guard swung on down the corridor, leaving semi-darkness behind it.

“Hello, boes!” the newcomer whispered huskily. Then a little louder, in an important tone, “Hi, clerk! a front room with a downy, a bawth, an’ a private bar!” The men near Willoughby were still talking in low tones. They moved closer to give the newcomer room. But at the sound of his voice, a bundle of rags beyond them stirred and, rising, gave the new scarecrow a hearty whack on the back, “Hi! Sammy! How’s the pike?”

“Hard, hard, Warty! I come in t’ rest muh tootsies. Have y’ saw anything of a young gent —”

Willoughby leaned forward and looked at him. The voice sounded familiar.

"Hello, Sammy!" he said.

"Howdy, Schmitty!" there was such a friendly note in Sammy's whisper at sight of him, that it surprised Willoughby. The tramp wriggled to a place beside him. "Did 'je think I'd shook youse?" he asked. Then without waiting for Willoughby's answer, "I run up agin a gink what put me wise — he says as how th' burg push is hot foot after the boes jus' now, t' git 'em out of Chicky. They've been roundin' 'em up t' beat th' band, an' they rough-house 'em when they can."

Willoughby nodded.

"I wuz in muh private car gittin' ready t' leave th' burg," Sammy went on, "an' th' porter had jus' giv' me a ody-cologne shower an' handed me muh blue silk pan-jammers when this here guy blowed in an' put me wise t' what wuz goin' on. An' so I says t' muhself, 'lef' without th' proper guardens of youth an innercince, Johnnie th' Gent'll git 'imself into a snarl 'n see red, an' likely git sent t' th' chair.'" Sammy yawned and stretched his arms over his head.

"And you—" Willoughby began.

"I come back," Sammy answered with a chuckle. He hunched himself comfortably against the wall and prepared to sleep.

"Just for me?" Willoughby asked, incredulously.

"Sure!" said Sammy, adding, "Say y'r prayers an' go by-by, mother's little lamb!"

Willoughby reached out in the darkness, sought the tramp's hand and pressed it warmly, without a word. He was touched and a little shamed. Were these the men the so-called respectable class despised? The hard-crust which the aristocratic traditions of his family had

built up around him began to melt. For the first time in his life, he had a doubt of things as they had been taught him. He began, in a word, to acquire a flavor. There is no more flavorless individual than the one who lines up in toto with the existing order of things. It is only as he becomes a doubter — a rebel — a thinker of new thoughts that he loses his insipidity and becomes durable.

Long after the disreputable tramp beside him had fallen into vocal slumber, Willoughby sat, with Sammy's unkempt head against his shoulder, marveling at the world as he saw it for the first time in his life. And he smiled grimly to think of the bloodless relatives he had left behind, and their emotions should his plight become known to them.

Day came in through the door — more like a shadow of light than light itself, though outside it must have been full morning. With it, appeared a man with hunks of stale bread and a granite-ware pitcher of water.

At sight of him, the tramps scrambled to the grating and began, with one accord, to leap at it on all fours, barking like dogs about to be fed. He threw the bread in, without looking where it fell. But even he smiled unwillingly at the realistic noises. "Shut up!" he yelled and closed the solid iron of the door on them.

Willoughby was so amused at the racket that he failed to collect his share of the rations. But when things had subsided, Sammy pushed a chunk of bread into his hand, and attacking another in his own dirty fist filled his cheeks with a huge mouthful. "It's good I come," he said between chews, "or you'd a' missed th' eats. Want a drink?"

Willoughby looked at the pitcher handed from one dirty mouth to another, and decided he didn't. Sammy grinned at his fastidiousness. But Willoughby noticed that he picked out as fresh a spot on the rim as possible before he set lip to it.

After the bread and water had disappeared, the hoboies began to be more sociable. Now in the daylight, they discovered acquaintances overlooked the night before.

For the first time, Willoughby found himself considering them as human beings. Their slang was mostly Greek to him, but he was interested in it and them. Sammy pointed out a few and commented on them to Willoughby out of the side of his mouth furthest away from them.

"See that there guy with th' rose colored whiskers?" he asked, jerking his thumb inconspicuously at a 'bo at the other side of the cell. "He wuz wallerin' in wealth onct an' some other guy done 'im out of a lot of it. He took th' matter to court an' lost all — an' th' lawyers took the rest. An' he got humpy an' made a election bet with himself that he'd never hustle fur another red, s'help 'im Peter! He ain't did a stroke o' work since — nor took a bath neither! Can youse blame 'im?"

Willoughby shook his head absently.

"That 'bo with th' jowls on 'im they do say as how he wuz high up in his class at — Oh, well, I disremember the place — an' after they let 'im out uv college, he quick took t' th' road, an'—"

The man, who had whacked Sammy on the shoulder the night before, came over and squatted down beside them. "Who's yer friend, Simp?" he asked, looking at Willoughby out of the corner of one disingenuous eye.

Sammy glanced about the cell and clapped his hands. “ ‘Tention, boes!” he said, “ this here party is — Johnny th’ Gent, otherwise Schmitty. He ain’t wise t’ the pike yet, so any information youse kin give ’im ’ll be appre-sh’ated by yours truly.” He grinned genially around on them.

In silence, the hoboes surveyed Willoughby. He felt like a strange bug under a powerful microscope.

They expressed themselves after their various dispositions. “ Howdy, bub!” said the one with the pink whiskers.

“ Welcome t’ our city!” exclaimed another, rising and giving the new recruit an elaborate bow, with one foot scraping behind him.

Another merely glowered at him from beneath bushy brows.

But Warty leaned over and whispered hoarsely behind his hand, “ Say, Sammy, hoofin’ th’ ties fur another purp?”

Sammy smiled embarrassedly.

Before he could reply, there was a rattle at the bars of the cell. An officer threw the door open. He beckoned the inmates curtly. They rose and shuffled out, like a lot of sheep. As the last one passed him, the official dealt him a kick, much as the shepherd does with the last sheep out of the fold — to encourage the rest, and in the interest of haste.

They passed upstairs and into the court.

Willoughby was surprised to notice a great change in their demeanor when they stood before the magistrate. They looked downcast. One snivelled; all whined. The carefree and jocund manner that distinguished them

in the cell was gone. They were the tramps as respectable people know them. It puzzled the new recruit. He had yet to learn that it was in self-protection that they assumed a manner devoid of all self-assertion, all chestiness. Kicks and contempt they might get, but nothing worse. Afterward, Sammy told him that he had known a "chesty 'bo" to get a rough-housing from the "bulls," and twenty days from the "mouth-piece."

After an examination by the magistrate, four were held — the men who had whispered together the night before. They were petty criminals, pickpockets and "second-story men" well known to the police.

The magistrate, in discharging the rest, promised them twenty days should they be found within the city limits in the next twenty-four hours. He evidently meant it, for he put all the power of a naturally robust voice into his announcement.

An officer escorted the scarecrows to the street and bade them begone. By a not unnatural coincidence the man who had been kicked as he came out of the cell, led the party. They fled down the street like a lot of frightened rabbits, pursued by a crowd of boys, yelling and hooting. As Sammy had said, things were stirred up for the "boes." With one accord they made for the railroads and, after much sneaking, "swung under" — tramp parlance for riding on the rods under freight cars. Many of them were rebuffed by the brakemen and forced to foot it out of the city.

Sammy and Willoughby were joined by Warty. They struck out for the railroad and tramped the ties till they were clear of Chicago. The two tramps talked, as they went, of things that puzzled the young man, unused to

their quaint language. The hoboies who had been locked up, it seemed, had been "workin' th' rattlers" an' "friskin' th' lushes" an' "a bull got wise an' wuz goin' to sic th' rapper onto 'em, but they giv' 'im a bunch of casers an'—"

Here Willoughby's look of dumb wonder attracted Warty. He broke off and doubled up with mirth, pointing at Willoughby's serious face. "Hi, Sammy!" he chortled, "yer gentlem'n friend ain't onto our spiel! Put him wise or I'll bust, lookin' at 'is mug!"

So, presently, Van Haaven understood, after elaborate explanations, that the tramps had been picking pockets on the trolleys, and robbing stray drunks in the street, and that a policeman had found it out, and had threatened to hand them over to the magistrate, but they gave him some money and settled the matter.

A faint amusement stirred in Willoughby at their manner as they enlightened him, much as a couple of school-masters might instruct a boy in the fundamentals of the curriculum. He began to realize the limitations of his own education so far as it had gone. In this company it was worse than useless. He had even an instinct to hide what he did know. As he walked along the ties, letting their jargon drift into one ear and out of the other, he smiled to think how at sea fastidious Uncle Pemberton would be in this environment. People seemed to live in worlds that hardly touched. Even in his own family there was a diversion of abilities — fancy his Aunt Harriet talking finance — or equally absurd — Uncle Pemberton discussing hats and gowns! Yet the one was probably as smart as the other, each in an individual line. In the sphere where he found himself, Willoughby was admit-

tedly ignorant. He felt the two tramps had a good-natured contempt for him, hardly any less than his own for them had he met them crossing the college campus.

The day climbed to early afternoon. The hoboes began to look about for a meal. After a lot of jabber, as unintelligible to Willoughby as Chinese, they struck off the ties into a country road. From this they turned in at a farmhouse gate. As they opened it, a big yellow dog came round the corner of the house, not barking as the ordinary watchdog barks — to warn — but in a sinister silence, walking on stiff legs, his paws making no sound on the gravel. The hair bristled on his back.

Warty shook his head, closed the gate and began to shuffle away. "I'm wise t' them kind," he remarked.

Sammy stepped close, took hold of the palings and looked over.

In an instant — like a whirlwind — the dog was at the gate, bringing a shower of pebbles in the speed of his approach. He snapped viciously at Sammy's hand. Still, he made no sound, but his eyes blazed green, as a tiger's on the kill!

Sammy stood not on the order of his going. The champion of the short dash might have envied him the speed he got out of his two legs.

As the three of them reached the road, they heard the dog bark — a deep rasping bark that ended in a howl. At the sound Sammy and Warty exchanged solemn glances, shaking their heads.

"Some mutts," Sammy remarked, sagely, "is all dog; some is part human; but that there one," he jerked a dirty thumb over his shoulder, "is half dog an' mostly devil!"

They went on down the road toward the next gate. When they reached it, Sammy waved the other two to a place on the bank that edged the ditch. "Stay there till I whistle. The three of us wuz too much fur that there hell-fire purp—he seen too much meat at onct." He advanced cautiously to the gate. A shrill barking followed his touch on the latch.

The other two, reclining on the grassy bank, saw Sammy, after a short parley, enter, stooping down from time to time. Presently he whistled softly. The other two rose and went to the gate.

Sammy sat on the lowest step of the piazza. The dog, a rough-coated black one with tan points, sat beside him, his tail waving gently, his nose burrowing into the man's hand in an occasional caress. (Sammy had a way of his own with dogs.) When he heard the strange steps on the gravel, he sprang off the piazza and began to growl. At a word from Sammy, he desisted and coming back to him stood licking the tramp's face. Sammy leaned forward and, grasping the rough coat at both sides of the dog's neck, shook him affectionately. "Say! you're a hell of a watchdog—you are!" Then to the two, "Come on back," he said. Rising, he led the way to the back door of the house.

A woman came out as they approached, her arms shiny with suds. When she saw the three of them, the dog following with his nose in Sammy's hand, she ran into the house and closed the door.

Sammy went round to the window. "Don't you git a scare, Missus," he said. "We want a handout, so we kin git t' th' next burg fur a job that's waitin' fur us."

Her only answer to Sammy's plea was to stick a

frightened face out of the window and call to the dog, "Sic 'im, Ted! Sic 'im!"

The dog bounded from the path and, barking loudly, seized Sammy's hand in his mouth, with the soft hold of the hunting dog with a bird, hardly closing his teeth on it. He evidently considered the whole matter a joke.

The three tramps burst out laughing.

Sammy reached down and patted the dog. "Ted says we're all right," he declared with a twinkle. "I guess it won't hurt youse t' pass us a handout through the window, Missus!"

She made no answer. But her head disappeared from the window. Presently, she handed out a newspaper package. Very gingerly she laid it in Sammy's grimy paw. "Now git!" she commanded briefly, and shut the window down with a bang.

"Where's th' coffee t' wash it down with?" Warty asked in a tone reeking with disappointment.

Sammy stood on tiptoe and tapped on the pane.

The woman appeared at the window.

"Hi, Missus!" Sammy bawled, making a megaphone of his hollowed hands. "How about a swaller of coffee?"

Again she disappeared.

The three waited in silence, the dog with his head cocked on the side and an air of interest, as if he understood there was an important matter under discussion.

Sammy was about to knock again, when she flung up the sash and handed down a tomato can that steamed alluringly.

This time the window banged with a finality not to be misunderstood.

Sammy handed the can to Warty, and they passed round the house and out on the road again. The sun was warm. They sat down in the shade of a gnarly apple tree, loaded with pink and white bloom, that grew beside the road.

The package contained a hunk of ham, uncut, and one of homemade bread. Sammy got out a knife and divided it equally amongst the three of them. Warty stirred up the scant sugar at the bottom of the can, and the feast began.

Perhaps it was the pleasant surroundings, perhaps it was the short rations that had come Van Haaven's way for the past week, perhaps it was only the natural appetite of the very young man just past growing time. At any rate it tasted like nectar and ambrosia to him. He could have finished the whole supply! At that moment Willoughby was more of a tramp than he had ever been before. In the exquisite May day the outdoor world made cities and the civilization they implied, seem unnecessary. In the nature of every child of man there is a certain amount of wanderlust. All there was in Willoughby had come to the surface. He stretched himself in a pleasant laziness on the earth under the tree and, pulling his cap over his eyes, drowsed on the alluring line between sleep and waking. Even the ground was fragrant, and the air was full of the springtime smell of growing things. A day to make a tramp of one for good!

The other two reclined on the other side of the tree, smoking stubs. Presently Warty turned over, yawned and said to Willoughby, "Hey, Schmitty, did Sammy put youse wise how he got his name?"

"No," the young man answered, yawning in his turn.

Warty snickered. Evidently he thought it a good joke on Sammy, whatever it was.

"Aw, shut up!" Sammy said, disgustedly. "Ain't we had 'nuf of that?"

Warty inhaled the last whiff of his red-hot stub and threw the infinitesimal remnant away. He sat up and clasped his hands round his knees. He was a villainous looking hobo, encrusted with warts at every available place. His knuckles were full of them—his leathery neck and his grubby face. He looked like first cousin to a toad and, to cap the resemblance, his eyes bulged and the lids hung over them loosely, slanting down toward his wide mouth. Just now the likeness was especially striking as he crouched under the tree. Willoughby felt a distinct repulsion. Sammy seemed like an angel of light beside him.

Warty reached for a spear of grass and chewed it, thoughtfully. "Onct when Sammy an' me wuz goin' from one town t' another — it doesn't matter jus' where," he began, with a mischievous leer at the Simp, "we had a pertic'lar reason t' git out of there —"

"Gag yerself!" Sammy said threateningly. Evidently something lay beneath that he did not wish to transpire.

"Who's snitchin'?" Warty retorted. He chewed fiercely on his grass, then spewed it forth with unnecessary force. "Well," he resumed after a moment, "we wuz clear of th' burg — half ways t' the next, swingin' under on a passenger, when Sammy here seen a ki-yi layin' beside th' track. He'd got hit with th' car, or someone had beat 'im up —"

"It wuz kids done it," Sammy interrupted.

Warty nodded, accepting the statement. "So wot

does Sammy do but wait till the train slowed up at a tank, a couple of miles on, an' out he rolls onto th' track an' hits th' ties back to the mutt, t' give 'im a mother's love!" Warty turned his eyes up in his head till only the whites were visible, and laid his hand on his heart with a melodramatic gesture.

"I seen th' mutt wuz worth a caser fur ev'ry hair on his hide," Sammy explained with a natural desire to clear himself of the charge of undue sentimentality. "I chased th' kale — not th' purp."

Willoughby liked dogs. "Well?" he asked, turning to Sammy, "how much did you get for him?"

Warty went off into paroxysms of joy. He rolled to the road and narrowly escaped a passing automobile. He picked himself up and blinked after the whirling car, sneezing in the dust.

Sammy smiled sheepishly. "I kep' 'im," he answered. "I wanted a — well, I got 'im on his feet in a week. Gosh! he wuz cut up like th' Black Hands had done 'im; but when I got through with 'im he wuz a bran' new dog. He stuck by me like a fly on a swill-pail fur a year till he run under a trolley an' got his head cut off. I seen I wuz licked," finished Sammy, shrugging his shoulders, "an I let 'im lie."

Warty came and sat with his back to the tree. A shower of pink and white petals fluttered down over him, with the movement. He picked one up and held it near to his myopic eyes, then cast it aside as beneath consideration. The near shave, he had just had, seemed to have bereft him of the desire for conversation. Even hoboes have nerves.

Van Haaven smiled. "Where does the 'Simp' come in?" he asked.

"Gosh!" observed Sammy. "Youse ain't awful bright, are youse, Schmitty?"

Willoughby admitted the charge, a little ruefully. It had been borne in upon him with some force since he had trusted to his own resources.

Sammy sighed, elaborately. "Well," he said, "I'm always interruptin' a 'lustrious c'reer by acts of folly, tyin' a can t' th' tail of muh kite. Touch a button in muh heart, an' every bone in muh body gits up an' squeaks t' git out in the rain! An' I git stung every time, too. But it never learns me no better. I bet you'll sting me too, Schmitty, before I git t'roo wit' youse!" he finished, jokingly. He groped in his rags for a stub, took a vigorous chew of it and stowed it in one cheek.

"Come on, boes!" he said. "Let's git out before we're chased." He waved a grubby hand toward the farmhouse. The farmer's wife was one thing — quite innocuous to the three of them, but the farmer himself, with possibly a husky young fellow to back him, was a different matter.

They rose reluctantly and walked up the road to the tracks. A green field of early wheat attracted them. They climbed the fence and, lying down, fell sound asleep. On the wing, the hobo is a nocturnal animal. Like the cat, he sleeps in the daytime. The hazard he takes in riding the trucks is markedly increased by drowsiness. So he plans to be wide awake and alert for anything that may come.

It was sunset when Warty turned over, yawned prodigiously and bestowed a wakening kick upon Sammy.

The Simp sat up with a start. "Eatin' time!" he observed, rubbing his eyes open and scrambling to his feet. He climbed the fence and crossed the next field. Warty followed him. Willoughby still slept.

By a circuitous route the two arrived at the farmhouse they had visited earlier in the day. The dog set up a furious barking, but Sammy quieted him at once. He sat in the shadow of a fragrant lilac bush and waited for Warty.

A shaft of light leaped out of the dark side of the house to the base of the bush as the farmer opened the door and peered out. Sammy, looking through the thick foliage, saw the woman hurrying to and fro getting the supper. An entrancing odor of coffee drifted out to him and made his nose wrinkle with desire. He felt he could commit burglary to get a cup. But at this hour it was too hazardous even to beg for it.

The farmer listened a moment. Then the door closed. Ted, the dog, who had moved a few interrogatory steps toward his master, stole back and lay down with a thump beside his new friend.

Presently there was a rustle, and Warty appeared carrying something under his arm. Ted started toward him, growling.

Sammy caught hold of the dog's tail and pulled him back. "Hi, Ted!" he remonstrated, "don't youse know a friend when youse lamp one?"

Thus admonished, the dog stood beside Sammy, and the growl that grew in his throat died away at a touch.

"Git anything?" Sammy whispered, rising.

"Sure!" Warty responded with sibilant satisfaction.

They went softly to the gate, treading on the grass at

the side of the path. Noiselessly they opened the gate and closed it behind them. Ted followed and, sticking his nose between the palings, gazed after them. As they reached the road, he barked once — a short and friendly note, as a dog barks outside a door that has closed upon someone well beloved.

When Willoughby woke, it was pitch dark — the black dark of the country. He reached out for Sammy. His hand touched the damp and flattened wheat. He was surprised. He sat up and looked about him, his eyes still heavy with sleep. As he grew used to the dark, he saw that the tramps were gone. He felt absolute dismay for the moment. They were poor company, but infinitely better than none, and for Sammy he had come to have quite an affection. There was something attractive about him — even the jaunty way he wore his unspeakable rags.

Before he could decide what he would do, there was a rustle in the grass and the two scarecrows loomed up beside him.

"Hi, Johnnie!" the Simp cried cheerfully. "Did j'e think we'd skipped?" He put down the sacking bag he carried and felt in his pockets for a match.

It transpired that the two rascals had stolen a fat hen from the roost (twisting its neck before it could alarm the others) a dozen eggs from the nests and a handful of rock salt from the barn.

They built a fire. The eggs they cooked by the simple process of sticking them into the edge of the fire. The hen, they cut up into collops and grilled on sharpened sticks. Salt was a luxury. After the feast was finished they divided the remnant of Warty's double handful into three parts and each had a share.

Afterward they sat round the dying fire and swapped yarns.

Willoughby found their experiences had a growing interest for him. The memory of the soft pastel landscape they had moved through that day had blotted out for him the bad-smelling cell and the grubby occupants. Tramping began to have a faint halo of romance. In the spring-time the gipsy that survives in wellnigh all of us from past ages, wakes and stirs. The ranks of the hobo would be swelled by many a thousand, then, if we followed our pleasure!

The air was full of the odor of life — apple-blossoms and fresh verdure, and the acrid smell of a nearby marsh, from which the frogs sent notes that sounded like the drawing of a bow across a cello string. The dome of the sky was blueblack, but from beneath the horizon a faint light sifted, till, presently, the arc of the moon appeared. The two hoboes had decided that they would try th' trucks, rather than "swing under," since Schmitty wasn't wise to travellin'.

They waited till late, to get a chance at a freight. Then walking across the field striated with shadows, down the ties a short distance, they found themselves near enough to the station to take advantage of any let-up in speed of a freight, to say nothing of a possible stop.

After a long wait, the track began to sing the approach of something. Sammy and Warty listened a moment, nodded to each other and rose to their feet. "Freight," Sammy announced oracularly. The three of them crept into the shadow of a toolshack by the track and waited till the cars came rumbling along, shaking the ground.

The long unwieldy line showed up with a chorus of clanks and squeaks.

When it started again, there were three passengers aboard whom the brakeman failed to spy. And for this reason. They had, of course, boarded the cars from the off side, climbed quickly over the edge of a coal car and lain down in the coal. It was — to one of them at least — a most uncomfortable journey, blinded and choked as they were with the dust from the coal. And a dangerous journey, too. They did not dare to slumber or drowse, for fear of slipping down into the depths of the coal and being overwhelmed and smothered in it. There is a trick of disposing one's body in the shifting coal that lessens the hazard, but even so it meant continual watchfulness.

At daybreak three jet-black scarecrows dropped from the car and rolled into the ditch by the side of the track. They made for the thick woods that lay a couple of fields away. Around the edge of the second field a creek ran lazily over its pebbles. It was not any too clear, but by one impulse the three men threw themselves flat by its brink and drank as if they would drink the little stream dry.

As they rose, Sammy caught sight, for the first time that morning, of Willoughby's face, black as the face of the end man at a minstrel show, with streaks of white where the water had washed it. He went off into a fit of uproarious laughter, nudging Warty and pointing at Willoughby, quite unable to speak. Much to his surprise Warty was laughing and pointing at him, and Willoughby was laughing quietly at them both.

Willoughby took one look at his own black hands.

Then he peeled off his coat and vest and shook the coal dust out of them, coughing and sneezing. He hung them on a nearby tree and, slipping off his trousers, did the same with them.

The other two watched him with some amusement. But when he began to divest himself of everything else, they sat up and fired questions at him in their quaint jargon, neither strictly polite nor even decent. Willoughby was minded to grab Warty by the slack of the breeches and duck him in the creek. There were two objections to this plan. One was that, though short, Warty was powerful and of an ugly temper. The other was, that he was determined to have a bath and did not propose to contaminate the water beforehand with Warty's grubby carcass.

So he took the chaffing as good naturedly as he could. The water was ice-cold and, at that early hour of the morning, he shivered in the sunless air. But he scrubbed himself vigorously, using the sand as soap.

All the time, the two hoboes overwhelmed him with gleeful advice. From all they said, Willoughby was led to infer that his ablutions were almost an affront to them. He had hard work to keep his temper. But he managed it, and it counted, as such things do count, a point or two in his education.

He washed his clothes while he was about it, and a curious mess he made of the matter. He surveyed the result with mingled emotions, realizing then to the full the gentle civilization he had turned his back upon. It dawned on him what clever people washwomen and laundry men were. He had always supposed "the lower

classes" — how he remembered Aunt Harriet's tone! — were unutterably stupid. Everyone seemed to be clever in one way or another. He wondered if he should ever find himself clever in any way, shape or form!

And so, for a week and a day, the heir to a thousand dignities wandered with tramps. He and the Simp were, as the latter remarked, "as chummy as a couple of fleas on a dog!" But the life he was leading, the friendships he was forming, came to an end one day, as a puff of smoke in the air.

One warm afternoon they walked the tracks. The hot air rose wavering from the steel ribbons. They jogged along in silence, half asleep. A gang of men were repairing the track ahead. Willoughby stepped to the other track.

He walked as one in a dream. The ties slipped away under his feet — fractions of an infinite path to Somewhere.

Suddenly like the oncome of a comet, hissing through a wet sky, an express shook the track behind him. It was upon him before his drowsy senses caught the fact of its presence. He stood paralyzed in its path. He hardly realized on which track it was coming. Track fright sealed his senses.

Sammy's voice rang out sharply.

Van Haaven felt him land between his shoulders like a catapult! The young man staggered — cleared the engine by a hair's breadth — was caught in the suction and whirled along a few paces, resisting with all his might!

A bundle of rags was ground under the wheels beside him — was tossed aside! Something showered him like a fountain — a round ball-like object bounced on the

ground — rebounded — came directly at him — *Good God!*

He stood still a moment that stretched as long as eternity — stunned — pulseless with shock. Then life came back in an elemental tempest of rage! He stumbled along after the receding train, brandishing his fists — yelling — cursing like a demon — driven mad by the horror of what he had beheld!

Then he felt the strength ooze out of his body. It was as if he sank feet first into a quicksand. Everything vanished in utter nothingness.

Consciousness came up wavering from the depths of things. A metallic pulse beat in Willoughby's ears — he moved instinctively to get away from it. It persisted — an unbearable annoyance. He opened his eyes.

The gang of laborers were abreast of him. The sound of their picks was the pulse that had drawn him out of the void. The sun hung — a bloodred ball — near the horizon. It seemed to beat with heat. Willoughby turned restlessly. It reminded him —

One of the gang glanced over, saw that he had come to himself, and called out to him. Van Haaven felt dazed — too dazed to understand, or even to try to understand. Presently the man dropped his pick and came running over to him, with a tin cup of cool water from their drinking pail.

"Dreenk!" he said, smiling and showing white teeth in a face as brown as a nut. "You feels bettra."

He sat up, dizzy and sick. The water tasted good. He was parched clear through.

As he drank, the Italian chattered like a good-natured

sparrow. "That fella — the car got 'im —? He sava your life — not abla to sava his own. Was he frien' to you?"

Willoughby choked — turned his face away. Was Sammy his friend? He had given his life for him. Could friend do more? The Italian was pointing — Willoughby followed his finger. Something covered with a piece of canvas lay beside the track.

The Italian continued to chatter. "Hees head — it come off — zipp!" He illustrated with a gesture, smiling all the time. "The nex' car will take the corpora — what you call 'im? — the body — to tha city —"

Willoughby managed to get to his feet and walk unsteadily out of earshot.

He had never seen death before. A few family funerals, decorously managed as to the æsthetic side; a man stunned on the football field, who afterward succumbed, had been his only experiences. He found this raw, garish presentment of the subject terrible.

The Italian looked after him puzzled. Then he shrugged his shoulders and slouched back to his work.

That night Willoughby spent in a nearby field, alone. Warty had disappeared. He clasped his hands behind his head, and lying on his back, looked up at the stars. For the first time he felt the mystery of life. Sammy's face was before him as he had last seen it coming toward him, the eyes wide and staring, the mouth contorted into a grimace such as one sees in a Japanese mask. How much of the real man was in the poor fragments of the body the wheels had tossed aside? "*You'll sting me too, Schmitty, before I git t'roo wit youse!*" Sammy

had said it half humorously. How it had come true! And there was no reparation he could make for robbing the man of his life. He spoke aloud in the darkness.

"I'm sorry!" he said, and felt even more lonely when only silence answered him.

CHAPTER III

It was dawn when Willoughby waked, stiff from lying all night without changing his position. The horizon was pulsing with color, deep crimson, as if it poured from a living heart. In the radiance a few late stars gleamed palely — little white ghosts of the night. Somewhere near he heard the sound of trickling water. He rose and found his way to it. A brook led through the green field — a mere silver thread of water. He threw himself flat and drank, then laved his face and hands.

The brownish stains that spattered him were a puzzle for a moment. Then he understood. It turned him pale. He was weak for lack of food, and the shock of the day before was still with him. Bought with another life, his own seemed suddenly of value. How should he spend it? Not tramping, that was one thing certain.

With the thought, he rose, crossed the field and sat down by the tracks.

In a short time the railroad gang appeared.

He approached the foreman and asked for a job.

The man shook his head and turned away. But presently he beckoned him and pointed out an idle pick. "See how you can make out," he said, briefly.

The friendly Italian of the day before came to his aid and showed him how to use the pick. But his stroke was weak and unskilful. He was glad when the noon hour came, and he could rest. The Italian shared his lunch with him, chattering, all the time they sat eating, like a squirrel in a tree.

How he got through the afternoon, Willoughby never knew. He worked as if in a strenuous dream, tortured by the pain of protesting muscles, drenched in sweat. Such fury of exertion was new to him. The sun beat down until the long line of track vibrated in the heat. Mechanically he toiled, stepping aside for the rush of an occasional train, hardly knowing when he did so.

That night, sitting on the steps of a country post office in the nearby town, he looked at the silver dollar lying in the palm of his hand — the first he had ever earned. It meant the sweat and toil of an agonizing day. Never again could he look upon money the same — it would be forever stamped with, if not his, then another man's toil — the spending of his body and blood — the seal of a hard-driven bargain.

People lounged in and out of the little office, bearing the spoils of the mail — papers and letters. Of one man, he asked the whereabouts of a restaurant. The man directed him to a cheap boarding house, just off the main street. There Willoughby got a bountiful, ill-served meal, at a table crowded with artisans and farmers. As he pushed back his chair, a farmer accosted him and asked if he would like a job. On the young man's assent, he asked him a few questions — could he drive? was he sober? single?

It sounded easier than it turned out to be. A hodge-podge of farm work and an every-morning drive to town with truck. Willoughby accepted it till something better should turn up. He held the job all the rest of that season, saving all he got till he was able to get a cheap, ready-made suit, and lay by a little money. On the strength of his improved appearance, he tried for an office

position of some kind — without success. The possible employers seemed to bank unduly upon experience. And Willoughby had had none.

It was at this point, when his small savings were all but gone, that he chanced, the following June, upon a man lounging on the station platform waiting for a train going south. They fell into conversation. The man proved to be a lumberjack from the Canadian woods. He had bought a return ticket and found that circumstances would prevent his using it till after the time had run out. So he offered it half price to Van Haaven, at the same time enthusing about the opportunities of the North — the place, he said, for men who were men! "This hot-as-hell oven!" he remarked, taking a vigorous chew of plug and including the country roundabout in a sweeping and contemptuous gesture, "isn't fit for a dog to live in. Up North the air, even in the summer, is like hard cider — always an edge to it. And every night it's cool enough to snuggle under blankets." He turned and looked keenly over the young man beside him. "You look as if you needed a brace, and Mipawan would give it to you."

After a little more conversation, it was settled that Willoughby should go North, with the possible chance of two positions that the lumberman knew were open and had promised to try and fill — that of purser on a lake steamer, or clerk at the lumberjack's hotel on the margin of the lake at Mipawan.

That afternoon Willoughby sped north, nodding in a day car, the rattle and jar of the train weaving itself into his dreams.

At twilight of the third day, the austere scenery of the

Temisgaming district unrolled itself past the car windows. They swung between a swift river, gold with the sunset, and black hills that plunged steeply into the water. It seemed like a newly created country — hardly a house to be seen — mile after mile of river and rock crowned with the hardy green pines and firs of the North. Once, Van Haaven saw a widening silver trail in the water — a moose swimming across to the other shore. And later the brakeman pointed out the black bulk of a bear in the brush as they sped past. Only four passengers beside himself occupied the single car.

The sultry warmth of the air, in which they had traveled all day, began to give way to coolness. The engine mounted an up-grade, complaining and squealing; then turned sharply from the river and wound in and out of a country dotted with little lakes, bordered with the profuse verdure that springs up even in the short summer of the north country. And still no overt signs of civilization — there was a surcease even of the tiny flag stations that had enlivened the country by the river.

Then, when Willoughby began to wonder if there ever had been so lonely a place this side of creation, an Indian appeared walking beside the track, a bark canoe on his shoulders — looking like a strange hard-shelled insect in transit. A moment later shrill child voices greeted the train, and he saw a group of Indian children carrying tin pails filled with wild strawberries, evidently on their way home to their burrow in the hills.

A little way ahead, a tiny settlement appeared, a double row of frame houses and sheds of doubtful plumb. It looked like a veritable metropolis after the lonely landscape they had traveled through all afternoon.

The engine tooted five times, very deliberately.

Willoughby turned to a bearded lumberman behind him, a question on his lips. Before he could ask it, the man made a smiling response to his inquiring look. "That's the signal for the hotel — five toots, five people for supper. They don't make the coffee till they hear. Funny custom, but it saves coffee and other things."

Willoughby smiled, thoughtfully. It seemed to be a practical place.

In another moment, the train stopped at a point between the row of houses just short of the lake. He swung himself off the train into the soft sawdust which carpeted the ground — springy, and with an acrid odor that was like a bitter tonic. The sunset still smouldered over the black rim of the hills and touched faintly the water of the lake. In its light he surveyed the sign across the front of an unpainted two-story building, announcing that it was "The Mipawan House."

The door was open. He walked in.

By tradition or as a matter of doubtful taste, the inside of a lumberjack's hotel is invariably painted a dull leaden gray, walls, floor and ceiling alike. It has an effect upon the spirits like unto a banquet of cold buckwheat cakes and ice water. The main room was full of men. A coal-oil lamp swung from the ceiling, and cast gaunt shadows that moved and melted into each other. Van Haaven stood a moment watching for someone in authority. Around him he heard a jargon of mingled voices and accents. Two men talked in a French patois. An angular Scotchman burred his R's in a group of woods-men.

A woman's laugh tinkled over the confusion. It was

like the song of a meadow lark — it seemed to bubble over itself — a silver sound.

Willoughby looked across the room. The crowd parted a moment. A young woman sat perched at a desk. A tall, rough-looking man bent over and picked up his suitcase from the floor. "Same room?" he asked her.

She nodded and turned to the next applicant.

Willoughby pushed his way through the intervening group and stood before the desk. The impression she made on him was of a brown haired girl of his own age, with a singularly charming face and figure, frocked in white.

Her eyes searched him in a keen, kindly sort of way, her pencil suspended above the paper.

"Someone from here told me," he began, "that you needed a clerk —"

Before he could finish, she rose impetuously and reached out her hand to him over the desk. "Dunstan promised he'd send me a clerk," she exclaimed, "but I didn't know you'd come so soon." Her hand clasped his warmly.

Willoughby was loath to let it go. In the face of her hearty welcome, he began to feel doubts of his value to her. His lean, dark face relaxed in a dubious smile. "Perhaps," he said slowly, "perhaps I'm not such a find as I seem. I have had no experience." The word tasted bitter in his mouth. So often it had stood between him and a position.

"You don't need it," she declared, "if you've the mind of a mousetrap." She paused. Her eyes questioned him, twinkling.

"I think," he said dryly, in the exact manner, had he known it, of his uncle Pemberton, "I think I can promise you that much."

Her laugh tumbled out again. She looked him over with frank appraisal.

At that moment, the supper bell rang. There was a general exodus to the dining room.

The girl made a graceful gesture of dismissal. "Supper first," she said. "Then we can talk things over."

He followed the crowd into a long low-ceiled room, with two tables set — the one lengthwise, the other crosswise. He took a seat at the first, but after a moment, a half-breed Indian girl who waited on the tables came and showed him to a place at the other table. Here sat the captain of the small steamer — the name, *Henry F. Peck*, writ in gold letters on his cap which he did not remove through the meal. Its visor protected his eyes from the glare of the lamp on the table, directly in front of him. He had a great, copper colored beard that left very little face to be seen. His mate sat at his left, a thin, sour looking Scotchman. Beside these there were, as Willoughby discovered afterward, the clerk and owner of the general store at Mipawan, which was built on a movable raft on the lake so that in case of a forest fire it could be towed out beyond the danger line. Only two of the five "toots" sat at this table, himself and an elderly man on his way to Mackenzie Island. The other three sat at the lengthwise table, where were also the lumberjacks and a couple of half-breed guides who evidently were more or less fixtures in the hotel.

The talk was all of investment in the Temisgaming district, which, some time before, had turned out very rich.

There were marvelous tales of miners staking out claims where "wire silver" lay in slender veins right on the surface; staking out claims that they sold for \$100,000 and like sums. Men went into the district in rags—and came out in riches. Fortunes were made at the turn of a hand.

In the talk, as it went round, was the optimism of the pioneer. Willoughby gasped as he listened. It seemed so incredibly easy to make money—till one tried it! The other table cleared itself rapidly; the lumberjack does not waste much time in eating, though he eats fervently while he is at it. One after another they slipped out unobtrusively, and the Indians with them. But the others sat smoking long after the table was cleared and the white cloth whisked off. The yellow beard of the captain showed faintly through the smoke like the sun through a mist, and his big voice boomed of mines and dollars.

The Scotchman broke up the party by scoffing at a Cobalt fairytale, and he scoffed so bitterly and with such venom, that one by one the occupants of the room got up and meandered out of hearing, into the main room.

Willoughby followed.

The chair behind the desk was empty. He sat down in another beside it.

It had grown very cool. Someone clamored for a fire. In a few minutes the man-of-all-work came in staggering under a pile of wood. Presently there was the cheerful crackle of ignited fuel, and the room began to glow agreeably.

Van Haaven leaned his head against the painted partition and tried hard to keep his eyes open, but they

closed in spite of himself. The conversation came dimly to him from afar off. Only occasionally when the four men playing poker in the corner got into a wrangle over a point in a hand, he woke and realized where he was. He was very weary.

A soft hand touched his shoulder — shook him gently.

He woke with a start. The girl of the desk was leaning over him.

Her face was very near his own, and she was smiling in a half amused, half tender way. "Come!" she said, "you're too tired to talk business." She motioned to his bag on the floor beside him.

He picked it up and followed her out into the hall and up the gray-painted bannisterless stairway.

She opened a door and showed him a cot assigned to him.

He tumbled into it and slept as the dead sleep, till late the next morning.

He was wakened by the sound of the door opening. A burly woodsman stuck his head in and looked about the room, evidently in search of someone. There were neither locks nor keys in the Mipawan House. When he retreated, Willoughby sprang out of bed, ashamed to have slept so long. He made a double-quick toilet and ran down stairs.

In the hall he met the girl in charge. She hailed him in her magnetic way, with a hand frankly outstretched.

"You'll find a bit of breakfast on the back of the stove in the kitchen. Help yourself — they're pretty busy." With the last word she was off upstairs, and he did not see her again till after his raid on the kitchen.

When he came into the main room, she was sitting at

the desk working at accounts. She motioned him to a seat and went on working till she had finished a particular item. Then she looked up and nodded in her friendly way. "Let's get acquainted," she said abruptly. "My name's Bella MacFallon — *Mrs.* What's yours?"

He hesitated. "My name — is Smith," he said deliberately. "John Smith."

She looked at him quizzically, bit her lip — smiled, and wrote it down with great and elaborate care in the register. "In case I should forget," she explained. "These unusual name —"

He flushed. Mendacity did not flourish in this woman's presence. "A mere matter of precaution," he said stiffly. "There are reasons —" He broke off.

She nodded thoughtfully. He felt an indefinable barrier between them. For some reason it was distasteful to him.

He leaned over and, taking the pencil from her, scratched out the name he had just given her. In its place he wrote "Willoughby Gordon Van Haaven." "So far out of the world," he remarked, "it won't matter. And," he added, flushing again and hating himself for it, "I'd rather you'd know."

She drew the register toward her and scrutinized the signature. "A mighty pretty name," she commented. "But they'll tear it to slithereens up here. I'll begin it," she added, with a twinkle, "by calling you 'Billy'; it's more sociable than Willoughby and takes less time to say. We don't waste prefixes in Mipawan."

The young man hardly heard what she said, for a couple of lumbermen came in leaving the door open behind them and letting a broad light in from outside. In its radiance

he found himself taking in every line of her, as if she were an interesting picture.

Bella MacFallon was of medium height, with a well-knit, charmingly rounded figure that expressed a sparkling vitality. She seemed more alive than other people. Her face was rosy-white, faintly freckled across the nose and upper cheeks — a deep warm color pulsed in it as if from a heart-stirred rhythm. Her eyes, set wide apart, were like turquoise matrix seen through brown gauze. Her mouth was full-lipped, flexible and turned up at the corners. And wherever in her economy, there was place for a dimple, Nature had been lavish. She had a faint line of them across her hands, two in her elbows, revealed by upturned sleeves, one in her cheek — the corresponding one artfully missing, just to make you look for it. And there was that in her manner, at once humorous and keen, that made one sure of her abiding common sense, and a certain glove-clad power, that did not detract in the least from her femininity.

To Willoughby she seemed the most real thing he had ever met. She made him feel as if in all his life before, he had met only shadows — pasteboard — sawdust — what not!

CHAPTER IV

After he had been at Mipawan a month, Willoughby felt more at home there than in his own family and town. The life was simple and unaffected. Bella MacFallon was, as it were, the keynote. There were, by actual count, only six houses in the whole place. The residents had to be unexclusive—or lonely. They lived on the edge of the “bush,” a vast wilderness whose runways were paths for wild beasts. The lake spread itself a crooked way with five hundred twisting and intricate miles of lonely shore. Occasionally a long trader’s canoe swept down from a hundred miles above—an Indian venture piled high with furs, and bound further south. Mipawan was itself an old Hudson’s Bay trading post, and to dwellers in the still lonelier regions “up Mackenzie way” it was a metropolis.

The tiny place boasted two stores. The one on the raft was limited to drygoods—and a few wet ones. A Frenchman kept it—Armand Thibaud by name. He was punctilious to the last degree, exquisitely attired, and affected an air of mystery. He lived on the raft, having sleeping apartments and a cosy little sitting room, where — wonder of wonders in that wilderness! — was installed a phonograph. Every night it was set going and it brought trade from forty miles around. Canoes, well filled, slid in out of the dusk of the lake and lay at the wharf, while everything in music, from ragtime to the Moonlight Sonata floated over the water. The clink of

bottle and glass was not lacking — a sort of convivial obligato to the music. There were occasional brawls as the evening progressed. But these were always nipped in the beginning by Thibaud and his man, who quietly dumped the offenders overboard into the water.

They kept good hours. Eleven o'clock found the place closed. But still the music played and drifted faintly into the hotel. The last thing was "God Save the King," muffled but stirring. Then silence.

Every place has its clown. Dennis Hooley took the part at Mipawan. He kept the grocery store next door to the hotel. A jolly Hibernian he was, and he looked like the complementary color to the green isle. His hair was red — fiery, and it stood on end like a wig donned in a moment vaudevillian. His face was red — a different shade. And as one who paints the lily — or rather the rose — he wore a bright red necktie and red socks, with his trousers hitched a bit high to display them. His sense of humor, though robust, was not subtle. The practical joke was its chief vehicle.

One twilight, for instance, the usual line of Indians came solemnly to sit on the rude bench in front of the hotel, until the music should start down at Thibaud's store. They sat, as usual, in stolid silence, while the sun set over the lake.

Dennis Hooley came out on the step of his shop and took a look round. His little eyes twinkled as they rested on the row of Indians. He disappeared into his store. In a moment he emerged and came toward the hotel, whistling a lighthearted tune. As he passed the Indians, he might have been observed to swing the hand nearest them in a wide movement like a man sowing seed. He

went on to the entrance and stood there on the threshold, still whistling.

At the end of the bench farthest from him sat a young couple evidently doing a little courting on their own account. Adolph was a fine looking buck — a bit of a poseur when the hotel was full. He always wore a scarlet silk handkerchief knotted carelessly about his neck, and his black locks shone as the wing of a crow in the spring. His lady love was a mite of a thing, with big, sloe-dark, slanting eyes and a smooth skin the color of a new saddle. As they sat in silence she gave vent to a terrific sneeze.

No one moved or even glanced at her. Indians have their own dignified code of manners. A second one rent her. The buck beside her stirred restlessly. At the third one he turned and looked at her in silent rebuke, or sympathy. Then as if she had set him an irresistible example, he began to sneeze too — short, sharp sneezes, like a wolf barking. They came so fast that he had hardly time to catch breath in between. At the same moment, an elderly Indian on the other end added an antiphony — sneezing so violently that it seemed the top of his head must come off!

After that they sneezed in frantic chorus, till all within hearing came to their doors to look on the amazing sight!

Hooley had disappeared.

Van Haaven found him doubled up on the floor in the hall, with his handkerchief stuffed into his mouth, going into fresh fits with every crescendo of sneezes. He was responsible. It was Scotch snuff he had sowed in the ranks of the braves.

Bella MacFallon came running out from the kitchen.

She took one look at the sneezing braves on the bench, to the Irishman rolling on the floor, then stood over the prostrate Hooley in laughing exasperation. "You devil!" she exclaimed. "And will you never grow up?" But she herself laughed till the white flesh at the sides of her eyes crinkled and the tears ran down her cheeks.

And now it began to dawn on the Indians that there was a joke somewhere and that it was on them. One by one they rose and stalked away, not deigning to look behind them for the author of the trick. And as they disappeared there came to the hotel a sound of sneezes dying away in the "bush."

Up to this point, it seemed to the ravished Hooley, that the joke was just where he put it. Later in the week he discovered a shortage in his trade. The braves had taken their custom twenty miles down the track to the next settlement, and for over a month their flour and molasses and baking soda came up by train, directly past the door of the jolly joker, much to his chagrin. But they never alluded to the matter.

Van Haaven's duties in the hotel were light. He booked the transients and kept the accounts in general; tended bar — rather a busy task when a gang of lumberjacks came from "up Mackenzie way." He was entirely unused to the routine, and Bella's patience often surprised him. She seemed to find him exceedingly amusing at times. It might have been his imperturbable manner, the natural solemnity of his countenance, or his impenetrability to humor. Often, as he gave her a verbal account of his stewardship, she would gaze thoughtfully at him, her head on the side, her blue-brown eyes half shut, evidently oblivious to what he was saying, till sud-

denly she would bring his dissertation to a close by breaking into her meadow-lark laugh.

"Never mind, Billy!" she said on one occasion apropos of nothing. "You didn't choose your name, and it isn't your fault if you can't see a joke till it comes up and rubs noses with you!"

He flushed darkly. "What's wrong with my name?" he asked, waving aside the other matter.

She pondered a moment. "Well," she observed, "to call you Willoughby is like calling a hunting dog 'Alice' — not that it would mean anything to you to put it that way —"

"No," he returned stiffly, "it wouldn't." He conceived she was playing with him. But from that time he had a disrelish for his name and would answer to nothing but her nickname, Billy. And he honestly strove to cultivate an acquaintance with the jokes that went on about him — horseplay and all else. Bella had her own style of fun with him. It piqued him not always to be able to fathom it. When a young woman comes to a very young and serious-minded man and delivers herself of a ponderous sentence, too deep for his instant comprehension, and while he is bending his forces conscientiously to catch its meaning — it is disconcerting to have her burst into delighted laughter, and leave him, with a tantalizing memory of twinkling blue-brown eyes under black lashes — and nothing more!

But underneath all her merry teasing, she was his very good friend. And the days of that summer were days to look back upon! In the early afternoon, after the train went, there was a lull in affairs. Then the Mipawan people went canoeing on the big lake, or, on warm

days, had a swim from a lovely beach whose white sand led by a gradual slope into the cool water. Even the little Indian maid who helped in the kitchen went in swimming. Hooley was in his element, and played practical jokes to his heart's content. One of these was to swim under water, till they had forgotten him and then suddenly to grab a leg, preferably feminine, as much in the manner of a man-eating shark as his imagination could suggest. The yelps that followed pleased him immensely, till Billy caught him and administered a ducking that nearly drowned the practical joker and set him seriously considering the matter from another standpoint.

Bella challenged Billy to a long-distance swim one day, and he, accepting lightly with masculine condescension, had the surprise of his life when he was obliged to do his best to nose out. Bella MacFallon was an all-round woman — she could swim, ride, handle a canoe in rapids and rough water as an Indian handles it; shoot straight — often she went into the bush and returned with a brace of partridges for supper, and she could cook them, too, to perfection! She was a natural born doctor — could set a broken leg as well as the official sawbones twenty miles below. She doctored all the animals on the place — whether it were a hog with the distemper, or a cow choking to death on an apple. As to the purely feminine things, she could cut out a frock merely by studying the occasional Sunday supplement that found its way to Mipawan in a traveler's luggage. Many were the wardrobes she enlarged for the few women roundabout, thus making a little extra money for herself. If anyone wanted to know the meaning of an Indian term, Bella MacFallon was first aid in the matter. She was the interpreter for

all who were short on the prevailing language. She spoke the curious French patois as the French themselves in the neighborhood spoke it. And once, when a homesick Italian turned up — on the wrong train it transpired — it was Bella who untangled his excited speech and set him on the right road, though, she said afterward, she didn't speak that language. Willoughby, pondering the happening deeply after his manner, fancied it must have been her ready sympathy that bridged the gulf.

She was married, but separated from her husband by a tragic turn of fate. He had owned large lumber claims up north, which had burned out in a disastrous and widespread fire. The loss had turned his brain. He was confined in an asylum, while his wife turned her capable hand to everything that presented itself, to earn enough to pay expenses. She never spoke of him, and it was surmised that she had been unhappy with him, though one could hardly connect Bella MacFallon with unhappiness. It was only her ready sympathy with everyone in trouble that showed her own path had climbed through sorrow. She was no stranger to Mipawan, having come there four years before with Captain MacFallon to be near his lumber interests. When the forest fire wiped out his fortune and the silent Scot had become a raving madman, Bella's journey down from above Mackenzie Island, with him roped hand and foot in the little cabin of the steamer, had made her personality and her tragic story a remembered one to all the people of the places they passed through. So shortly after her husband had been safely incarcerated in a private asylum in Toronto, she took, first the position of stewardess on the *Henry F. Peck*; then, later, the office of matron in charge of the

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Mipawan House. There were no other openings, and she took what offered with the fine spirit that was characteristic of her.

Willoughby often wondered what her previous history had been. She was so simple in manner, that he could form no idea of her position in the world. She had no pride in circumstance. Willoughby had seen her come out to interview a New York magnate on his leisurely way north for the hunting, just as she was from the kitchen — sleeves rolled up, and her arms and hands powdered with flour or shiny suds. And yet there was a dignity about her which made even the half drunken lumberjack step carefully in her presence.

Full summer passed over the tiny hamlet, sprinkling daisies thickly between the houses, till it looked as if they floated on foamy white water. Long blue and gold days came and went their cloud-decked way, reflected in the still mirror of the lake unstirred by a breeze. Then the nights began to have an edge in their chill. The Northern Lights gleamed out like mysterious glints from a far off glory.

The Mipawan people gathered around the big stove at night and talked, told stories and occasionally sang songs of the old kind that everybody knows. With the transients, they had oftentimes quite a good-sized party. One evening Willoughby remembered with special significance.

A couple of hunters were staying overnight at the hotel, waiting for a particular guide to join them. They were in a jolly mood, and had a fund of jokes and stories to tell. There was also a land promoter, Mr. Complex, whom Willoughby had seen once or twice before. He

had come down on the steamer that day to see his wife off on the train — she was going South on a short visit. He was a poetical looking man — more like a man of letters than a speculator in timberland, and his eyes had the soft gaze of the dreamer. It was Complex who started the singing that night in a sweet high tenor voice. And he felt the music with the temperament of the true artist. Willoughby saw tears in his eyes as he led the impromptu chorus in "Annie Laurie" and "Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms."

They sang everything in the category. "Jingle Bells" and "Suwanee River"—and, as a matter of course, they finished up with "Goodnight, Ladies." Then the chairs were pushed back, and everybody said what a fine time they had had, and some kind soul suggested crullers — fresh ones — from the pantry closet. Bella's crullers were famous.

And so — as Pepys says — to bed.

It must have been considerably after midnight when Van Haaven woke with every inch of flesh on his body creeping in unreasoning terror. A sound, hardly sensed, was ringing in his ears — a sound akin to that which made the early settlers hurry to the blockhouse to fight for their lives — the war whoop of the Indian! Again and again it rang out — piercing — diabolical — the cry of a devil! He sprang out of bed and went to the window.

Someone went on stumbling feet around the corner of the hotel, cursing and swearing in a bloodthirsty way with a tongue so thickened by drink that the words were hardly discernible. As Willoughby watched, fascinated, the man returned. He brandished a knife in his hand, and from time to time he jabbed it viciously into the

side of the hotel with such force that the flimsy structure jarred under the assault. Now Willoughby knew why the government of Canada forbade the selling of liquor to the Indians — it was likely to bring out the original savage in them. And the result no man could foresee. He wrapped a blanket about him and cautiously observed the man below him in the dark. He was crazy drunk, and Willoughby did not doubt that everyone who fell afoul of him would hunt trouble with some success.

So the noise raged all the night. No one in the hotel slept with any continuity. At times the wretch would stand and yell with all his might like a violent child. Then the horrible war whoop would pierce the ears with its blood lust. It was an experience Willoughby never forgot.

When it at last died down toward morning, he snatched a little sleep. The breakfast bell woke him. He hurried downstairs, wondering if everyone else was late, too. By the time he got down, only a few remained to be served. Hooley was plunging head first into a boiled egg and managing to mingle a goodly part of its yellow on the red of his face. He looked up as Willoughby came in, swallowed a huge mouthful of bread with a gulp that resembled a robin with an over-fat worm. "Hello, Bill!" he called out genially. "What did y' think of th' Indian on th' warpath?"

Willoughby shook his head. "Pretty tough specimen! Can't you civilize them any better than that?"

To his surprise Hooley choked, then burst out into a loud laugh, in which all the room joined.

Willoughby looked annoyed. He did not approve of Hooley's jokes, the more so as the point of them so often

escaped him. "Well?" he asked coolly, raising his eyebrows, and glancing about him in some displeasure.

Bella passing through the room took in the drift of the conversation. She smiled down on him. "Your Indian on the warpath, Billy, was the real estate man, Comples, on one of his sprees."

Billy's jaw dropped. "Not the man who sang hymns last evening with us?"

Hooley whacked his thigh in enjoyment. "You bet it was!" he chortled. "He runs off the track sometimes; but he always sends Mrs. C. off out of the way first."

Whereupon Hooley gulped down the last sticky spoonful of his egg and devoted himself to a recital of Comples' doings — and they were astonishing!

In the midst of the recital, Thibaud sauntered in to a late breakfast. He looked radiant, for his engagement to the girl of his heart had just been announced. She lived "down the river" at the next settlement.

Hooley glanced up as he came in. He rose and went out. Billy saw him dive into his own store, then run down to the little shop on the raft. In a moment, the strains of a song popular that summer floated into the dining room through the open windows. Thibaud reddened with anger — half rose from his seat, then thought better of his dignity. For the closing words of the old-time song, very plain in the stillness, were — "I Picked a Lemon in the Garden of Love, Where They Say only Peaches Grow."

Whether this was a delicate statement of Hooley's opinion of Thibaud, or in compliment to the lady, no one knew. Everybody snickered, of course, as people will when the joke is on the other fellow. And this was

merely the beginning of Thibaud's discomfort, for the record belonged to Hooley, and he managed to turn it on, thereafter, at least once a day, escaping nimbly when the enraged Frenchman pursued him, the record safely under his arm. And since there are no locks or keys in Mipawan, there was no way of shutting the intruder out.

Meanwhile Complex slept all day and meandered about at night making things lively. Toward the end of the week he looked pretty seedy. And he sobbed like a banshee at a wake, instead of yelling like a wild Indian. Willoughby wondered at the patience of those around him. But he had yet to find the one who spoke any word but that of pity. Perhaps they realized that it was merely the tremendous reaction against the silence — the nerve racking sameness of life in the bush. And since the man was well liked, they chose to wait till he returned to himself, thinking none the worse of him for his temporary aberration.

The end of the week came. It was late on Saturday afternoon. It had rained the day before and a stiff wind whipped the water of the lake into whitecaps. Willoughby had been in for a swim and found it rough going. He came out a little tired and, after dressing, sat down on the raft to rest. A loon flew overhead, trailing its mocking laughter across the gray sky. Yellow leaves lay on the water — the harvest of the wind. The trees looked thin against the edge of the hills. September was nearly spent. The birds had flown south and left silence behind them. Willoughby turned his collar up against the chill of the coming twilight.

A man slouched round the corner of the shop and sat

down just out of sight. He began to mutter under his breath, weeping from time to time in a morbid self pity — the unfortunate Complex just recovering from his spree.

It disgusted Willoughby. He rose to move away.

There was a sudden splash in the water.

A white face rose, buffeted by the waves — sank — a helpless hand clutched at the air.

Van Haaven threw off his coat and sprang overboard. The spray blinded him. He shook it out of his eyes and peered around for the drowning man. Suddenly he was gripped from behind — gripped in a death grip! Complex must have come up directly beneath him, and he wrapped arms and legs about his rescuer, pinioning the swimmer's hands to his side.

Together they went down into the depths.

Willoughby had been caught so by surprise that he had hardly time to take a breath. The blood beat in his head. His lungs felt as if they would burst.

They emerged. One gasp of the spray-wet air, and with a terrific struggle the desperate man drew him down. Then they were up again like a couple of bobbing corks.

Willoughby sent a desperate cry, ringing for help, to the shore. They swirled around. The drowning man tightened his grip — his face blue-white — the eyes staring.

They had drifted away from the raft, far into the wind-swept lake.

Van Haaven could see Thibaud run out to the front of his shop, wringing his hands. But the Frenchman was helpless. He could not swim.

Again, in the struggle, the two went under. Wil-

loughby began to feel his strength leave him. He could not reach the other's body — caught from behind as he was, he could make no effort to extricate himself. All he could do was to tread water, with Comples wrapped about him like a noxious vine. It was then he saw, dimly through the blinding spray, Bella running to the raft. She kicked off her shoes and sprang far out into the gray water. The merciless lake engulfed him, struggling feebly for release.

He must have lost consciousness. The next thing he remembered was being lifted up out of the water by an excited crowd of men and laid on the raft side by side with another dripping figure. Bella bent over him anxiously, her wet face dropping water on his own. When she saw he was conscious, she smiled into his eyes. "Pretty close shave, Billy!" she said.

He raised his head and motioned to the dripping man beside him. "Did he — did he — ?"

"Comples is all right," she answered cheerfully. "And I guess it's taken all the fire-water out of his system."

It took a couple of hours to bring the would-be suicide to full consciousness, and it was a very repentant man who appeared at the supper table that night in borrowed clothes and still shivering from his cold plunge.

Several times that evening Van Haaven found Bella's eyes fixed upon him thoughtfully, as if she were working out some intricate mental problem.

The next morning she invited him to go with her into the bush in search of a hen that was "stealing a nest." They walked in silence, Bella going ahead picking her way between the gray boulders and thick underbrush,

stooping occasionally to look in a likely place for the errant hen. At last they found her sitting so still that it was only the sun glinting on a beady eye that betrayed her.

In a moment, Mrs. Hen was scuttling toward home cackling indignantly, while Billy gathered up a nestful of eggs and put them carefully into his hat.

They turned to go back. Presently Bella sat down on a convenient rock and motioned to him to a seat beside her. "I want to talk seriously to you, young man!" she said.

"Before you begin," he began quietly, "I want to thank you. I couldn't speak of it last night because —"

She waved his gratitude aside with a smile that understood while it deprecated. "It's just that I want to talk to you about, Billy. When I saw you out in the water and realized the odds against you, something flashed into my mind. And all the time I was towing you in it came to me that, if you went under, no one here knows anything about you — where you live — who your folks are —"

Willoughby nodded thoughtfully.

"Suppose," she went on, leaning her back comfortably against a tree, "you had got the worst of it — suppose you were lying up there in your room with a sheet over your face — your folks would never have known. And whatever is the reason you have left home — they ought to know — they have a right to know." She was silent, leaving him to think it out for himself.

He looked uncomfortable. The thought of his people was anything but pleasant to him. "Well?" he asked impatiently.

Bella smiled at his petulance. "You mean something to somebody, Billy — everybody does. And so long as that's the case, somebody has a string on you, wherever you go — Oh, I know! It isn't always a comfortable string, but it's there just the same," she finished somberly. Perhaps she was thinking of the sinister bond in her own life.

Billy frowned. "What do you want me to do?" he asked after a moment's consideration.

"Suppose — as a starter — you tell me a little about yourself, Billy," she suggested, a coaxing note in her voice.

So Willoughby, sighing prodigiously and very much bored, began at the very beginning and told her of his adventures — the reason for leaving college and a home that had never been over-congenial. His account of his people was short, but Bella's intuition bridged the gaps. She had possibly a fairer idea of the Van Haavens — their faults and their virtues — than Willoughby who had lived all his life with them. And she felt sorry for the bloodless family forced for the first time to endure a real grief in the absence of the only son of the house.

"And then I came here," he finished. He rose and looked down at her, a warm look in his eyes. "And it has been the pleasantest part of my life so far."

"No doubt," she agreed. "You have been brought up behind a wall of conventions. It has been good for you to get out and see what real folks are like. But now, it is time for you to go back." Her blue-brown eyes gazed gravely into his own. They had a look of commonsense in them that disconcerted him.

He picked a bit of bark from the tree against which



Willoughby, sighing prodigiously and very much bored, began at the very beginning and told her of his adventures

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she leaned and shredded it in his fingers, whistling softly between his teeth. After a moment he cast it from him as if it had embodied her proposition. He smiled with the superior scorn of a very young man. "Go back," he echoed, "and let them harp on the money it's taken to keep me and educate me — I guess not!"

"But they did spend it on you, didn't they?" she demanded, stooping over with a smile he did not see, and picking a gray feather out of the eggs in his hat as it lay on the ground.

"Why, yes," he returned a little impatiently. "I suppose so."

"The truth can never hurt us, sonny," she observed, "unless — we — let — it."

Van Haaven winced. "Sonny," indeed! It made him feel miles apart from her.

She saw and guessed, and instantly set about to remedy the slip. "A man of your age and experience," she said gravely, "does not need to be told that it is the part of the gentleman to recognize his honorable debts and to pay them as soon as he can."

He straightened up a little and drew a deep breath.

"Uncle Pemberton needs you — the only one of your generation — to help him. He is getting old. He must have someone to lean on. And Cyril evidently is not much of a business man."

Willoughby started in surprise. He had not told her anything of the kind. How did she know? He did not realize that his omissions had told her as much as the things on which he had laid enough stress to mention.

"Well," he admitted ruefully, "I guess you're right. I'll think about it."

Bella rose and gave the shoulder nearest her an affectionate pat. "Good!"

Sulkily he followed her home. For days he made no effort to put his resolution into effect. And Bella made no reference to what they had discussed. She was shrewd enough to let him act in the matter without further urging from her.

Autumn had come and gone, turning the hills a vivid red as if the embers of a forest fire glowed in the trees and underbrush. Then the color faded out of the woods like a flame that had died down to ashes. The lake began to look bleak. For the first time the place was not beautiful to Willoughby. Yet he delayed the day of his leaving, reluctant to go.

The lake froze over. Dog sleds began to come across the white expanse, the Indians driving them with weird cries that carried far. At night the Northern Lights veiled the sky with their mysterious flames — pink, rose and fire-blue, scarlet and purple, in wavering ribbons tied together at the zenith, shifting, changing with every moment, pulsing, paling, melting into one another, trembling as though a breath of the higher air fanned them; then vanishing on the black horizon!

Willoughby began to realize how near was the coming of the white barrier that would shut him from the world at large. If he were going home, it was time to start. Reluctantly he saw that Bella was right. He must go.

It was a chill gray day with a sprinkle of snow in the air, when he stood on the rear platform of the rickety train and waved his farewells to the people of Mipawan. They were all there to see him off — Thibaud and his man; Hooley, with a red sweater hiding his red tie,

bawling facetious advice; the little Indian girl from the kitchen, a dishtowel over her arm; the captain, his big golden beard bristling with the cold; his surly Scotch mate; Louis the Indian canoe-maker and his squaw — they were all there, and the children of the little settlement, their cheeks like scarlet apples in the frost. Wiloughby's eyes grew a trifle dim as he watched them. They had been good friends to him. But when the slow-moving train had swung round the curve that hid them from sight, one figure — and only one — remained with him as if he still beheld it — Bella MacFallon standing a little apart from the rest, with the white flakes coming softly down about her. She did not wave to him as did the rest, but he felt a certain something in her grave attitude, as if one standing in a church alone, prayed silently and sincerely.

CHAPTER V

It was with mingled feelings that the Van Haavens received their sullied son back into the bosom of the family. Willoughby wondered that they showed so little curiosity about his adventures in the year and a half of absence. But the fact is, they were dubious of what he might tell them. He was to them like a thoroughbred dog who has sojourned at the pound among the ordinary yellow variety, and is presumably contaminated by his associations.

Uncle Pember, too, was relieved — obviously so. He had spent much gold trying to trace his nephew — with the utmost quiet, of course. No one, except their very near friends, knew that Willoughby's long absence was anything but a prolonged tour abroad for his health — broken down from overstudy. But, though money had been poured out like water in Willoughby's behalf, it was not so much as mentioned to him. This was a change — and a happy one. It inclined the young man's heart toward his uncle as nothing else could.

Allaine, his young sister, was much changed. From a supercilious schoolgirl, she was already quite a woman of the world. She was slim, very brunette, rather tall, and extremely cool in manner. She greeted her brother on his arrival home, as if he had been away for a weekend festivity. Willoughby felt her eyes stray over him critically. He was glad that he had deferred his reap-

pearance till one of the best tailors in the city had made him entirely presentable. As a matter of fact, he stayed at a quiet hotel in the suburbs for nearly a week before the family knew of his presence.

A certain resentment boiled up in him at the aloofness of her manner toward him. He was her brother — she had no right to treat him so. He took a step to her, caught her to him with one long arm and kissed her with rough deliberation. “That’s no way to behave to the prodigal son, Allaine!” he declared with a short laugh.

“Willoughby! how you do rumple one!” Allaine exclaimed, backing away and stroking her hair into place. But Willoughby noticed that the extreme condescension dropped out of her manner and her cool eyes looked more friendly.

The three women of the family represented, as it were, three different generations — Harriet, the oldest aunt, did things in the old-fashioned, conservative way. She had her own carriage, with its maroon linings and cushions, and the men in liveries to match; and she never trusted herself in an automobile. She had her old-time circle of acquaintances, and while her dresses conformed to the modes, there was always a protesting note in the set of them.

Edwina did new-fashioned things in an old-fashioned way. While she was naturally as conservative as Harriet, the swing of the times had caught her earlier. It swept her along and she really enjoyed it — with reservations. She used the cars that were in the Van Haaven garage — with discretion. Every day she went to the park for an airing, the car moving along as slowly as if in the wake of a hearse. The chauffeurs were distracted.

They drew lots which should be the unhappy victim of her daily drive.

Allaine and Cyril (he refused the title of uncle. It made him feel elderly — which he wasn't) were up-to-date in all things, and as congenial as if they were the same age. They went to dances together, motored, played bridge and were a unit in the things they enjoyed as in the things they despised. They were more like brother and sister than uncle and niece.

Willoughby soon began to go out to social affairs. After the quiet life of a year and a half, he thoroughly enjoyed it. For more reasons than one, he was *persona grata* to the feminine half of society. The mammas sought him — we might say, hunted him — with zest! His prospects were exceptional. The young girls were attracted by his indifferent manner toward them, his dark, unchanging, slightly melancholy countenance and the mysterious rumors that followed his reappearance.

On his part, he found them very attractive, but he caught himself constantly analyzing their motives and weighing them in an invisible balance, wondering how nearly they resembled his sister, who at home revealed herself frankly as a selfish creature with no more human emotion than has the high-polished diamond. The social code was her only conscience; correct deportment her only morality. Of the great affairs of the world she knew — and cared to know — nothing. If she had been asked to tabulate herself, she would doubtless have classified herself as "A Van Haaven" — not as a human being. And Willoughby had seen a few instances of her unbounded snobbery that filled him with disgust. This was one of them.

At a dance one night, Willoughby, leaning against the wall, observed a pretty, young girl sitting near. To his knowledge no one had asked her to dance that evening. He wondered why. The couples on the floor passed so close to her that she had to draw her dress about her and sit sideways against the wall. Her small chin was in the air. She tried to look as if she were having the time of her life. But once Willoughby saw the tears well into her eyes, and she bit her lip to keep it from quivering.

It was then he lounged over to where Allaine stood resting between dances, surrounded by a group of young men battling as it were, for the next with her. He bent over her and spoke in a low tone, "Who's that little, fair-haired thing over there by the wall?"

Allaine turned indolently. She shrugged her shoulders. "Nobody we want to know—an old fuss-cat brought her in for the dance. We're freezing her out. She won't come again."

Willoughby looked down at his sister. He was indignant. But speech came slowly to him.

She returned his gaze coolly, a little smile hovering on her smooth red lips. The music started up. She gave herself graciously to her next partner and whirled away, leaving Willoughby standing still meditating an answer to her ill-breeding. He was a little like his Uncle Pemberton—with an old-fashioned idea of the courtesy that marks the real thoroughbred. He disliked snobbery. And he did not realize that young girls are taught that very thing in the finishing phase of their—God save the mark!—education. To "shake" the undesirable—to disown all connection with any unfortunate not in their

particular "set" was part of the curriculum of the finishing school.

So he stood a moment, feeling a resentment that was possibly a bit unfair to his sister. The oncoming couples bumped against him, reviling him jocularly and begging him either to dance or to get off the floor. So he slid off, taking his chance between the gliding lines. They were doing one of the newest steps — he was not quite sure of it. Suddenly taking a resolve, he walked over to the little, fair girl in the corner and, bending his long length over her, asked for the next dance.

She dimpled with pleasure. But a sudden movement sent the crystal tear, that had gallantly been kept in abeyance, rolling down her cheek, to her great mortification.

Van Haaven pretended not to notice. But inwardly he commended her pluck, for she merely lifted her head a little higher, not even deigning to wipe the tear away. Her mood had changed on the instant. She was in a delightful flutter. She felt triumph marching toward her with scarlet banners and trumpets of joy! That young Mr. Van Haaven of all people should ask her to dance! The color crept into her face. "Oh, I think this is a lovely dance — I'm enjoying it so much!" she declared, forgetful of past woes.

By the time the orchestra swung into the next dance, he had learned that she was the daughter of a professor at the University, and that an old friend of her mother's was one of the patronesses of the affair, and had insisted on her being invited, though she didn't know anyone. She was a college girl, well-bred, well educated, pretty, young, exquisitely gowned — yet the know-nothings of

"our set" had repulsed her with all the refined cruelty of which shallow minds are capable.

Willoughby determined, with some inward heat, to give Allaine a talking to when he got her alone. It seemed to him that what he termed her bad manners had reflected shabbily on the whole family. For the first time in his life, he felt a definite pride of birth and breeding — but very far from Allaine's conception of it. To him it meant obligation — to her, license.

He danced with the girl several times. Her name was Edna Hildreth. The sound of it impressed him pleasantly. Afterward he hunted up a man or two and introduced them to her. At the end of the evening as she went up to don her wraps and go home with the old lady who had invited her, Edna turned to him, her foot on the stair, and said with her face glowing with pleasure, "I've had a perfectly splendid time. Thank you so much!"

Willoughby watched her while she ascended and vanished around the turn. She was a nice girl — he would cultivate her — set or no set!

And so he did. Many a really interesting evening he spent at her house, and together they enjoyed some of the best music of the winter — opera and symphony concert. But Allaine never took the slightest notice of the young girl. When Willoughby took her to task about it, she smiled amusedly and said she "really wouldn't presume to teach him the usages of decent society — if he didn't know them, she was sorry." And with that she struggled politely with a yawn and left him.

In that moment, he felt it in him to detest his sister most cordially. But after his manner, he said nothing

more. And he took Edna to rather a few more affairs than usual that week. And, by a coincidence, they were all affairs at which Allaine was also present. But if the latter was annoyed, she betrayed not the slightest sign of it, but smiled serenely on her brother and as serenely ignored his companion.

Altogether, what with his real liking for Edna Hildreth and the opposition he met both from Allaine and — languidly — from Cyril, the affair might have ended in marriage, but for a happening at the first of the year. Willoughby was much at the office. A new stenographer had come to the place — a clever, nervous little thing, who did prodigies of work. She looked delicate and worried. Once Willoughby found her in tears. After some persuasion she was induced to tell him the cause. Her people lived in another city — too far away for her to visit. She was quite alone in the city, and at times the loneliness was more than she could endure. She was timid about making acquaintances, realizing how careful a girl must be in a big city.

Willoughby expressed his sympathy. It would be doing her a poor service to make any offer of entertainment or company to her, since her mere appearance with the nephew of her employer would count against her with anyone who saw her. The case of Edna had been so different. Still, what he could not himself do, Edna could — give her a friendly hand, let her feel that there was someone who cared that she was in the world, invite her to an occasional social affair.

So that evening the unquenchable philanthropist hied him to Miss Hildreth to bespeak her good offices for his protégée. He waited in the little reception room lighted

with its cheerful wood fire and wondered what the look of it would mean to the lonely girl. There were books — books — books, everywhere. A book review lay on the table at his elbow, the leaves uncut, a quaint paper knife resting on it, as if Edna had just laid it down. A great bowl of American Beauties, his gift to her the previous night, glowed on a stand by a wide window. Their fragrance mingled with the odor of the burning wood. The place had a home feeling that the cumbersome house of the Van Haavens lacked. As he tried to analyze it to himself, Edna appeared in the doorway, exquisitely gowned in a rose-colored affair that brought out the pink in her cheeks and the soft gray of her eyes.

Willoughby rose to meet her. She had never looked so charming to him — so joyous — so full of the loveliness that is the right of the young girl. He retained her soft hand in his a moment and turned her round smilingly. "This must be a brand new frock," he said, "or else you're doing extra stunts in the charming line!"

Edna laughed and submitted to the survey. "It's the dress," she assured him, "it just came home to-day."

They sat down by the fire and began to chat about all sorts of pleasant things — the opera last night — the motor trip he had planned to take her mother and herself to an out-of-town meet. Then, taking up the paper knife and drumming thoughtfully on the table beside him, Willoughby began to tell her of the lonely girl at the office and the kindness he felt Edna could pay her. "The sight of this lovely room," he observed, looking about him with appreciation, "is enough to cure an attack of homesickness in itself."

He raised his eyes to her face. Edna was sitting up

very straight. Her scarlet lips were compressed into a tight line. The immobility of her face struck him oddly. He thought for a moment that she must be ill. Then he decided she was vexed with him. But still he had not the slightest glimmering of the reason.

"Well, really!" she said at last in a chilly little voice, and stopped.

It flashed across his mind that she must be jealous of the other girl. "You see," he explained, "it isn't as if she were a man — I can't take her out or do anything for her — it wouldn't be fair to her, poor little thing!"

She misunderstood him. "Indeed!" she commented coldly. "You think my social position is in line with hers, I suppose, and that I pick my friends from the working class."

"Why —" he began.

"There are plenty of settlement workers who would be glad to entertain her —" the girl went on disdainfully. "I would be glad to oblige you, Mr. Van Haaven, but really I associate with my equals — I never step out of my caste."

She rose and stood before him, angrier than he had ever seen her.

He rose and stood looking down on her, his head in a whirl. It had come up like a tropical storm. She evidently supposed he was making light of her, when on the contrary, he was paying her the highest compliment.

He bowed stiffly. "I fancy you have misunderstood me," he murmured. "I must apologize." He turned and walked slowly to the door. "Good night!" he said, and, picking up his hat and coat from the hall table, let himself out into the street, angry and puzzled.

This was the girl who had suffered at the hands of the snobs of the set above her. This was the girl who had quivered under the lash of disdain—the girl to whose rescue he had been glad to come, supposing her to be of better human clay than those who ignored her. And now—in her turn, she refused to associate with a girl who was not in her particular stratum! He did not understand that his unceasing attentions to Edna Hildreth had wakened expectations in her mind of ultimately taking her place in his social circle, and that therefore she was on the watch to keep herself from “entangling alliances”—so to speak. To that end she had even drawn the line sharply in her own “set,” to the indignation of some of her friends. Perhaps if Willoughby had known or surmised this, he would have made allowance. As it was, he was indignant with her. Somewhere in his mind he recalled dimly the story of the unjust steward who having found forgiveness, went out and dealt mercilessly with his own debtors.

Life seemed to lop itself off into slices for Willoughby. The pleasant association was ended. He never went to see Edna Hildreth again, though she wrote and, in a measure, excused herself for her conduct. She even offered—in a very lukewarm way—to “do something for the office girl.” But Willoughby did not take her at her word. It was too late. He was thoroughly disillusioned.

Somehow Allaine got wind of the break and her smile, languid—superior—was hard to bear. The “I-told-you-so” attitude is not always expressed in so many words.

To fill the gap left by the lost friendship, Willoughby

threw himself into business with a zest that surprised himself. He did the best that was in him. But he soon realized that his was not the mind of the financier. Though he did good routine work under supervision, he had no marked initiative and little capacity for large affairs. He was conscious of a growing respect and affection for his uncle, to whom business in the large was an everyday thing. And Pemberton's confidence in his nephew was touching to the latter, who realized ruefully how little foundation there was for it.

CHAPTER VI

Willoughby held tight to business, determined to "make good" for his uncle's sake. His naturally serious disposition, as well as his constant association with the elderly man, made him seem older than his years. Cyril dropped his patronizing air with the young man and did him the honor of consulting him on a couple of investments, and what is more, actually took his advice. It was in the fall of the year after his return that Uncle Pemberton had an accident one afternoon on his way home. Another motor car skidded against his own. He was badly bruised about the head and shoulders. The accident gave him a shake-up from which he was slow to recover. It left him nervous and extremely irritable. For the first time he began to worry about business. And though he leaned considerably on his nephew and found him a comfort, he was testy and unreasonable. Willoughby had need of patience.

And not only Willoughby, but everyone about him. Uncle Pemberton flatly refused everything the doctor advised, and he was highly indignant when warned that if he did not rest from business, he might sojourn shortly in a land where the dollar is not.

That winter, Pemberton Van Haaven went from bad to worse. The spring found him under the strong medical arm, with a trained nurse in attendance — or to be more correct, a succession of trained nurses. One after another, they came, confident of their ability to manage

the case; and one after one they tearfully departed, utterly at odds with the patient and his eccentric moods.

After a few months, shouldering the entire business affairs of his uncle, Willoughby began to show the strain. He grew thin and gaunt and silent under it. One day early in June, it was borne in upon him that he must snatch a rest, even if it were only for a week. But where? The answer came instantly — at Mipawan, the most out-of-the-way place he could imagine.

That very night his trunk was packed and ticket bought. The morning found him on the train. He had arranged to have any important business that could not wait his return telegraphed up to him. The first half-day en route, he kept wondering if he had remembered everything needful — made all the proper provisions — traveled, as it were, hand in hand with business. But the next morning his thoughts were with the quiet little outpost towards which he was hastening. He had heard from a few of the people there, at very long intervals, and he had written several times, as well as remembering them at Christmas with a huge hamper of edibles, which included things quite ungetable in that far-off place. The little girls had received dolls and the boys toys. Edna had helped him choose them, he remembered with a little twinge of regret. Bella's gift he had bought himself — a sumptuous suède-covered, hand-tooled edition of a book he knew she liked. And between the pages he had tucked a bit of exquisite lace, without saying anything about it in the note that carried his good wishes. He still kept the warm, friendly letter she had written him in return — so sincere and simple — so like herself. He took out a handful of letters from an inner pocket to see if by any chance

he had it with him. But search did not discover it to him. Instead, a tiny, scented, pale blue envelope fell out — Edna's letter offering to "do something for the office girl."

Willoughby smiled a trifle bitterly as he tore it across and, opening the window, cast it to the wind.

The last hundred miles of the journey to Mipawan are comfortless to the traveller. The cars are strictly day cars — and their seats are strictly utilitarian — little stiff, upright, plush-covered seats that exude dust with every lurch of the train. And the windows are unduly small, with a sash that, be one tall or short, contrives to shut out the scenery. Willoughby sat on the middle of his spine and looked under the wooden barrier, till he had a crick in his back. Then he straightened and, stretching up, looked over it, till he had a crick in his neck, when, as a sort of compromise, he went to sleep and forgot the landscape entirely.

But he was wide awake when the little train puffed round the curve, revealing the handful of rough shacks that made the hamlet of Mipawan. He swung himself off into the deep sawdust, with the thrill of pleasure a boy knows at the swimming hole.

The very first one he saw was Bella MacFallon.

She gave a cry of surprise to see him, and advanced to meet him, her apron full of tiny chicks and followed by an anxiously clucking hen. "Why Billy!" she said, and reached out her disengaged hand to him.

Willoughby felt the same sensation he had felt the first time he grasped it — that this woman before him was the only real human being he had ever met in a world of vain and wandering shades.

He put his suitcase down where he stood, without fear of its being stolen, and followed Bella to the barn. When hen and chicks had been safely cooped, they walked slowly to the hotel. It was still cool in the far north. A fire had just gone out in the big stove in the main room. Bella touched the lukewarm iron and turned to Willoughby with a smile.

"Come out into the kitchen, Billy — it's warm there, and I'm making biscuit."

He established himself on a bench beside the table, feeling rested in the calm of her presence. And for real beauty of movement, Bella, making biscuit, was pre-eminent. After a moment, Willoughby told her so.

"It's like dancing with your hands," he observed critically, watching the swift turn of her wrist as she kneaded and molded and deftly flipped the doughy cushions into the pan.

"I know what you mean," she remarked, tucking the pans into the oven. "The body's a wonderful machine. Often I've stood watching men with the pick — that's a beautiful movement if you like. The play of the muscles in the back and shoulders — the sinuous rise of the arm muscles — the big swing of the pick itself, and the attack so clean-cut and accurate. And I've often thought," she added with a smile, "that I'd like to see a good boxing bout done very slowly — it's too quick for the eyes."

"That would be easy," Willoughby suggested, "with a film put through in adagio time. By George, I'll try it when I get back!"

As they sat waiting for the biscuit to brown, no less than five dogs of various breeds pushed inquiring noses

through the door and came in to greet Willoughby — all dogs he had seen and known before — none of them had forgotten him.

The little Indian girl followed them into the kitchen; so seeing a chance for a stroll, Bella left the cooking arrangements in her hands and ran upstairs to put on a coat.

They made their way down to the lake and set off in a canoe.

The lake and its budding shores looked like a delicate pastel. A few big white clouds shouldered up above the hills, and mirrored themselves in the blue water. The smoke of a distant camp fire curled up, a slender gray feather in the still air.

Willoughby looked about him with quiet delight. Some tense fiber of his mind, strained with the anxiety of the last few months, relaxed and let him rest.

Bella's keen eyes noticed it. "Now you begin to look like yourself," she observed. "At first you looked worried — like a centipede wondering which foot he should put next."

He smiled at the conceit. "Let's land here," he suggested, "and climb the hill for the view."

In a few moments they sat at the top of the slope, on a lichenized rock, with the gay cushions from the canoe to soften its granite. Willoughby found himself telling Bella what he laughingly termed the story of his life — all that had befallen him since he put the miles between him and Mipawan. It was prosy, and he knew it, but his companion listened with real interest.

"Well," she said, "you haven't found it so dull or so difficult as you thought, have you?"

"N-o," he answered doubtfully, "but whatever I do,

whether pleasure or work, I feel a certain lack. Sometimes I think I haven't fallen into the right place — civil engineering would be more congenial. I have half a mind to study it — But there!" he broke off impatiently. "I must stick by the business. There's no one else to do it."

She nodded approval.

"Life seems as flat as champagne that has stood in the glass overnight," he remarked a trifle ruefully.

"What do you do for amusement?" Bella asked.

"There's an unchanging round of things," he answered. "And by-and-by even the operas seem all alike — with only a change of name. All the tenors grunt the end of their phrases — all the contraltos and basses sing flat — all the sopranos wriggle when they take a high note — and all the audience sit and pick out the flaws, as one picks roses out of a garden —" He smiled at his own conceit. "It's an ungrateful way to think of things, isn't it?"

She nodded thoughtfully.

"And I motor a good deal too," he went on — "break the speed limit almost every day. All the police know me by this time. But no matter how fast one goes, it isn't possible to get away from one's self and one's boredom. If one had a hobby it would help to fill things in. Allaine, for instance, is studying fancy dancing, and she and Cyril chatter about new steps and seem to get a lot of fun out of it. Aunt Edwina is interested in current event clubs and musicales; and Aunt Harriet has her old friends to go and see and her health to look after, and her favorite doctor and what-not! But I have only the grind at the office." He looked half apologetic at having seemed to

complain, but, in his overstrained state, it was a very real matter to him.

Bella expressed her complete understanding of his mood, then resolutely turned the conversation to other topics. Willoughby was here to get away from his troubles — his uncongenial environment. He must not be allowed to dwell on anything that recalled unpleasantness. So she plunged into a humorous recital of Mipawan happenings that bridged the years of his absence and entertained him immensely.

Willoughby sat throwing pebbles at a rock on the edge of the lake and frowning when they missed. Gradually the two fell silent. The unnoticed sounds of the woods about them began to steal into the silence — a wood dove crooning its triste little note — the splash of a bass hunting on the surface of the nearby water — a squirrel chattering in the branches above their heads — a rabbit going furtively about its business in the bushes. The tired man knew the comfort of relaxation. He sighed with content.

Presently Bella looked at her watch. "Time to go home," she announced.

Van Haaven rose unwillingly. Stooping he took her hands and pulled her to her feet. They stood facing each other a moment. He still kept her hands in his own. He looked down into her blue-brown eyes, a half puzzled expression in his own, as of a man slowly waking from sleep.

She twinkled at him. "What's the matter, Billy?" she asked whimsically. "Do I look like your long lost baby-sister, stolen by the Indians in the early umpties?"

He made no answer to her absurd remark, only dropped her hands lingeringly as if he loved the touch of them and, turning, led the way down the hill.

He said nothing as they scrambled down the twisting path. For an instant Bella wondered if he were offended with her. Then she put his curious behavior to the account of his strained nerves and forgot it. He laid the cushions in the bottom of the canoe and steadied it while she got in. He seemed distract and he spoke hardly a word on the way home.

But when she stepped out of the canoe at the little wharf, laying her hand lightly on Van Haaven's shoulder, his dark, lean face flushed, and a look came into his eyes that Bella knew only too well in other men's eyes. She could not misunderstand it. It came to her with a distinctly unpleasing shock, that, for the first time in her association, Billy was feeling sentimental towards her — she could not fancy that it was anything more than that. He was nervous and depressed, no doubt, and her sympathy had softened him unduly. She would be on her guard and steer him into the old matter-of-course channel again. So she chattered gaily while he drew the canoe out of the lake and turned it upside down on the bank. Van Haaven finally seemed to try to follow her lead, answering her with some show of interest.

But for the rest of the week's stay, it was a clash of wills between them. Bella was keenly on the watch to check sentiment in its beginnings with a seemingly careless word, a jest, a laugh. It occurred to her that possibly — though it was most unlikely — Willoughby did not know her husband was still living. So she took occasion to mention Captain MacFallon in the course of con-

versation. He showed no surprise, but after a while he asked Bella if she believed in divorce.

She hesitated. "Yes," she answered finally, "under some circumstances."

"What, for instance," Van Haaven continued, "your own?" His voice trembled.

"God forbid!" Bella said gravely.

"But why?"

"I promised 'for better, for worse,'" she told him with a little lift of her chin. "And it happens I'm a woman of my word."

"But what could it possibly matter to him," Willoughby urged, "as things stand?"

"It matters very much to Captain MacFallon, my good Billy," she said deliberately. "And in this way, if you must know. He is entirely dependent on me at present, having made ducks and drakes of his fortune and mine, too. I have only a small income from a tangled estate. I would be the meanest of the mean to desert him now of all times. But fortunately," she added, lightly, "there is no question of such a thing."

"But why—" he began —

"An end to this catechism," Bella announced decidedly. She rose as she spoke. "I have to go up the lake to doctor up a little papoose," she said with a return to her usual matter-of-fact tone.

Van Haaven sprang to his feet. "Let me row you there," he begged.

Bella shook her head smilingly over her shoulder. "Not this time," she denied him. "I'm going to take the small canoe and I'll get there on the wings of the wind."

He followed her to the hotel and her rebuff did not prevent his having the canoe already in the water when Bella came down, with the cushions and paddle at hand for her. And when she saw this evidence of his thoughtfulness, the irritation she had felt at his questioning died away. After all, she told herself as she pushed off and left him standing, a lonely figure, on the little wharf, it was her own fault. At least he knew now her feeling in the matter. He had a right to know where she stood.

When she came back, Van Haaven rose from a seat on the wharf to help her ashore. He had been there ever since. He resumed the conversation where they had left off, seemingly quite unabashed by her rebuke.

"Excuse me if I seem inquisitive," he began determinedly, "but would you consider it dishonorable for a man to tell you —"

"Emphatically, yes!" Her tone was crisp, but for the first time she felt the strength in this quiet young man. And since he had to be rebuffed, she did it with no shadow of uncertainty.

Van Haaven felt the finality in her tone and manner. Had he definitely proposed to Bella and been as definitely rejected, he could not have been surer of her sentiments. She had uncompromisingly sealed his lips. Love had come to him suddenly, overwhelmingly, for a woman who was as far out of his reach as if she lived on another planet. And with that knowledge he knew for the first time what it was he missed in life — why he went day after day about the business of living, feeling everything flat and futile. His was a single-minded nature that made few friends, cool and not easily stirred to emotion.

But the few human associations he allowed himself meant more to him than to the gregarious man. He was not so analytical as to realize that what he most demanded of his friends was the double virtue of sincerity and simplicity, with a certain gilt edge of kindliness far removed from the mawkish. And he never dreamed that what had warmed his heart to the scarecrow, Sammy, was identical with Bella's charm — those same virtues translated into finer clay.

As a wealthy young man, he had not escaped the sentimental girls — the love-hunters, as bold as pirates. And, however their lovely exterior had lured the natural man in him, he felt ill at ease with them. He was far too undemonstrative to thrive on lovemaking, though this very fact made him the more pursued — vastly the more alluring to the young girls of his set.

With Bella MacFallon he felt as much at ease as with another man. Now the friendship was tinged with the unrest of love, but it was based securely on profound esteem. It had acquired a sudden enchantment, like a familiar place seen through a mist. Van Haaven smiled to think of the contrast between this quiet, exalted passion for a woman, supreme and the pleasant, shallow drawing to Edna Hildreth on matters of music and art — ignoring the deeper things of life. The two women were as far apart as the poles. Further than this he made no analysis — only recognized the broad gulf that lay between.

After this conversation, Willoughby kept a curb on himself. It was no doubt easier for him than it would have been for a warmly demonstrative man. Bella was quick to sense his restraint. It counted strongly in his favor with her. One could have observed no change in

their relations, but the new sentiment flashed out in a score of ways, like the spark that leaps from one charged wire to another.

When the day came for his leaving, after he had bidden the town adieu, individually and collectively, he strode over to where she stood in the soft sawdust, beside the puffing engine. He took her hand into a warm clasp. "Would it bore you," he asked, "if I wrote occasionally?"

"By no means," Bella returned smilingly. "We need letters in this lonely place."

Without another word Willoughby swung himself to the platform of the moving train and was gone. And it was not till long after the smoke of the engine had disappeared down the track that it occurred to Bella to remember that he had not said good-by. She sensed his feeling in the omission, and it touched her.

All that summer and the following winter, Van Haaven's letters continued to arrive. They were not long-winded letters, calculated to strain the patience of the recipient, but short, concise, almost business-like notes that ended almost as soon as they began. Bella Mac-Fallon smiled over them. They were so like Willoughby! And just precisely once in so often, a phrase — a chance word — would slip in, that tingled with feeling. Then, as if to atone, the next few letters would be as dry as if penned by an automaton. Occasionally Van Haaven would send a book he had read and liked, and they exchanged comments on it.

Suddenly, toward spring, the letters stopped without a word of explanation. Bella told herself that Billy was

cured of his sentiment for her. Some new face had taken his fancy. She smiled with satisfaction — then sighed on top of the smile. About this time an urgent letter called her to Toronto. She was away a couple of weeks. The visit left her distract and silent. On the way home she rather hoped for a word from Van Haaven. But there was none.

The Mipawan folks expected Van Haaven up for a holiday when the June days arrived. But the summer came and departed without a word or a sign from him.

It was late in the following fall. A light snow had fallen. The sky was gray with coming winter. Bella took a brisk tramp to the hill behind the town. It had been a hard week, with a number of transients — hunting parties — passing through the little trading post. Complex had been on another spree. He had just taken the steamer for home accompanied by his wife. From where she stood, half-way to the summit, Bella could see the *Henry F. Peck* steaming round the last point of land into the wider stretches of the lake. She watched it pass the bend and disappear, her hands thrust into the pockets of her gray sweater, the collar turned up about her white throat. People were always coming and going in one's life, leaving peace behind them — peace, or, perhaps, even loneliness. By some subtle connection of thought Billy came into her mind. She had not known, till they ceased to arrive, how much she enjoyed his letters. At this season when the great white barrier began softly to interpose itself between the far North and the peopled world of the South, they brought a message of human companionship. Restlessness was upon her, the restlessness that

comes with the first snow and again at the first trickle of melting ice in the spring. They know it so well in the North.

Bella leaned against a sapling that thrust its bare branches toward the gray sky. She wondered if there were not some way of escape — some chance of life in a town for the next six months — the lonely months. All her available income for the year had gone for her husband's sanatorium expenses — and others unexpected. Her position at the hotel, while it did not pay well, sufficed for her own support. And while it left much to be desired in the way of human companionship, she might not fare so well in a city where the competition was keener. Her visit to Toronto had convinced her of that. She had found no opening. Reluctantly, she resigned herself to another winter in Mipawan. In the spring she might consider other plans. Not now.

Her mouth set itself resolutely. Bella was not the one to whine over the inevitable. She stepped back into the path and ran swiftly the rest of the way to the top. The breeze was roughening the water and tossing the branches of the trees till they clattered. She swung along, whistling, her ungloved hands tingling with the cold.

A great shoulder of granite rock rounded out the top of the hill. She sat down sheltered from the wind, her feet tucked under her, her eyes gazing out over the lonely lake. In all the expanse of country that lay around it there was not one friendly roof to give a human touch to the wildness. Behind, the little trading post clustered, shrinking against the hill as if in terror at the mysterious wilderness. Soon the dull colors that still lingered in the landscape would be blotted out in white snow from horizon

to dim gray horizon. And oh, the maddening sameness of that gray and white!

Bella shook her shoulders impatiently. Must her troubles follow her everywhere? She thrust her chilled fingers into the pockets of her sweater.

A letter! It had been handed to her when the train came in. She had forgotten all about it. Now it offered a welcome distraction. She leaned comfortably against the rock and read it.

It was from a little old lady in a New Jersey town—a Mrs. Eglin who, with her husband, had spent a few weeks at Mipawan on a fishing trip. She had taken a great fancy to Mrs. MacFallon. They had kept up an irregular correspondence ever since. The letter was to remind Bella that she had promised to pay her a visit sometime, and to beg her to redeem that promise before the winter closed in.

"You know," Mrs. Eglin wrote, "how lonely you will be these next few frozen months. Just think what pleasant things we could compass here so near to the city and all its joys! Really, dear Mrs. MacFallon, I have quite set my heart on having you come. Do not—please do not disappoint me!"

Bella sat looking at the letter as if it were the passport to Paradise. Why should she not make Mrs. Eglin a short visit, and meantime search out something in the nearby city that would help pay expenses for the winter? There seemed to be nothing against the plan—her remembrances of Mrs. Eglin were warmly pleasant ones—it would be delightful to see her again. And there were special reasons why Mipawan, with its associations with her tragic past, was all but unendurable this particular

winter. Bella shrank from the long white months in the desolate, wind-swept place.

She had hardly a moment of hesitation. Already her brisk mind planned the details of departure. And when she ran lightly down hill to the little hotel, it seemed to her that she had left all her troubles there on the summit.

A week later she stepped on the train and jolted her way back to civilization.

CHAPTER VII

After Willoughby's brief respite, he came back to increased stress and storm in the financial affairs of the family. Perhaps it was best for him to be thus diverted from the contemplation of a love that could expect no fulfillment. Finances went from bad to worse. Uncle Pemberton could be less and less relied upon for advice. He seemed, with the increase of his malady, to have lost his business perspective. Willoughby, in his inexperience, sometimes had the feeling of a man in a runaway automobile — treading a pedal here — pulling or pushing a handle there — twisting a useless wheel — and, all the time, rushing pell-mell to destruction.

As the Van Haaven fortune dwindled, one luxury after another was given up. Willoughby's splendid car went first. He missed the exhilaration of a swift spin on the days when things went especially wrong. Gradually the staff of servants about the house were dismissed. Only a few remained. The great handsome town house lost its exquisite grooming. It began, indefinably, to look neglected. The Van Haavens, never given to much entertainment, dropped off even the little they had indulged in. Allaine chafed — blamed Willoughby for the increasing discomfort. She had drifted, during her last few years at school, into a fast, flashy set to whom money meant everything. She was not acute enough to sense their shortcomings. She had snubbed, without a qualm, peo-

ple vastly her superiors — and all because they dwelt on the shabby borderland of "moderate means." Now, to Allaine's infinite chagrin she found herself marooned on that very borderland, overlooked by those of her friends whose wealth was still secure.

The first time it happened — a considerable event, and no invitation — Allaine supposed it a mere mischance of the mail. She was so sure of it that she called up the giver of the entertainment on the phone and stated the case boldly and with some languid amusement. But the evident reluctance of her wouldn't-be hostess disillusioned the girl. Allaine was coldly indignant. She gave the tardy invitation a place in her wastebasket, tearing the paper across contemptuously. For the first time in her life, Allaine felt the sting of the snub. As yet it carried no lesson for her. She felt only unpleasant astonishment — there was surely some mistake. But when it happened again and again, she fitted realization to the fact. Some of her chickens had come home to roost, though she was far from claiming them. It takes an introspective mind to adjust one's own actions to an exterior perspective. The thing looks right to us because we believe it right. Our own intimate motives and desires confuse the issue till we are incapable of judging how it looks to other people. So with Allaine. She had snubbed because she saw good reason. But that people should snub her, and find any good reason for it, was beyond her comprehension.

So Allaine beheld her luxuries and her friends dwindle like a stream in drought. In amazement — in stunned disbelief — she saw them diminish. She grew sullen and rebellious. The day arrived, garish and uncompromising,

when Willoughby told the family that the city house would have to be closed. They must go to an old-fashioned country house that was unrented and unprofitable, and economize strictly till things changed. He had the whole family against him, even Uncle Pemberton, who should have known better the condition of money matters and the impossibility of keeping up the town establishment on their present income. But young Van Haaven went ahead with his preparations for the family migration, unmoved by protests. He found an unexpected ally in Aunt Harriet. The reason was not far to seek. Long years before, she had spent part of a summer in the old country house. She remembered it with pleasure. Besides she was devoted to driving and the roads and lanes about Olmsby were lovely, easy on the horses and interesting to herself. So she did her best to persuade Edwina of the advisability of a sojourn there. In the end she was partly successful. But Allaine was from first to last rebellious. She accepted the inevitable, because it was inevitable. There was no way to stay behind — the house was to be closed — she had no friends thoughtful enough to ask her to visit them — she had no money to remain in the city by herself. So she yielded — but as contumaciously as possible. Relations between herself and her brother were strained, though of this Willoughby affected to take no notice. If Allaine chose to sulk — let her sulk.

And so presently they were settled in the roomy country house a little way from Olmsby, as discontented a family group as had flocked together since the Dutch grocer made his fortune. Aunt Harriet soon found that autumn, merging into winter, in the country was not so alluring as the long summer days she remembered there. Still

she managed to extract some enjoyment from her daily drives, with the windows of her brougham tightly closed, her carriage stove going full tilt and the scenery sliding by with deliberation. This was what Aunt Harriet called "taking the air." And if one were not disposed to quibble as to the definition of the word "air," the daily process was accurately described. As a matter of fact the particular kind of air at Aunt Harriet's disposal was apt to press down upon her an overpowering drowsiness. She frequently missed more than half of the scenery. This she never admitted, even to herself.

Allaine did nothing these melancholy days but sulk and look out bitterly on the empty road beyond the front gate, and light one scented cigarette on the butt of another, since there was nothing else to do. Sometimes she pored over the fashion magazines. They made her only the more discontented. She thought almost vengefully of her friends. One or two of the more amiably disposed motored out to call on her, but they let that once suffice. Allaine was so different — they told the others — not nearly so much fun as she used to be. And the place she lived in! Was it true that the Van Haavens had really lost all their money and *had* to live in that way?

CHAPTER VIII

After a three days' nightmare of jar and noise, Bella MacFallon reached Olmsby at dusk.

She was surprised to find no one to meet her. But since that was the case, she jumped into the bus at the station and rattled down the main street to a small, Quakerish frame house at the end of the town.

It looked forlorn. The shutters sprawled, some open, some shut. Light glared from the windows, whose curtains were thrust back untidily — the blinds up at all angles.

Her heart sank. She had expected something vastly different from the precise little lady at whose beckoning she had come.

The bus clattered away, leaving her standing on the porch groping for the bell.

Quite a perceptible interval elapsed between the pull that elicited a faint jangle from the bowels of the house and the tardy opening of the door by Mr. Eglin himself.

He stood peering into the dark a moment.

Bella reached out her hand. "It's Mrs. MacFallon," she said.

"Oh," he returned, in evident surprise, "then you didn't get our telegram?"

"No," she answered, mystified by his embarrassment, "is anything wrong?"

"No — yes —" he replied. "My wife's brother is ill — she had to go west to him. She telegraphed —" he

went on jerkily, like a message in transit. "So sorry — Come — yes, come in!" He reached for her suitcase and bore it into the house.

Mr. Eglin's looks explained many things. His coat collar stood half up and half down, as if he had sprung into it at top speed when the bell rang. His gray hair lay in wisps on his worried forehead. The hand he offered when she spoke her name was moist and soapy.

"The wife said," he continued, "that if the telegram missed you, you were to stay till she came back — it will only be a few days," he added apologetically, "and she hoped you wouldn't mind."

Bella smiled ruefully. She did mind — and very much.

Mr. Eglin cleared his throat embarrassedly. "And that —" he went on, "is not the worst —" He paused.

"The worst?" Bella interrogated. The thing began to look really humorous. She doubted whether a visitor had ever had a more depressing arrival.

"The housekeeper was taken ill yesterday, since Mrs. Eglin left," he said. "She went to the hospital last night."

Bella sank down in the nearest chair. "Anything else?" she asked, whimsically.

The old gentleman eyed her gloomily for a moment. "N-no," he said dubiously. "Y-yes," he added after a little thought. "There isn't a clean dish in the house."

His anticlimax and the expression of his dismayed countenance were too much for Bella's gravity. She bit her lip to restrain a smile. "Cheer up, Mr. Eglin," she said, encouragingly, "I'll soon fix that for you, if you'll do me a favor in return. You see," she broke off whimsically, "I'm in a business mood."

He nodded. "What is the favor?" he asked anxiously.

"Just to engage a room for me at the hotel here — there is one, of course?"

His face cleared. "A very good one — the Rosebush Inn — and quite near."

He donned his overcoat in haste, reached the front door, and came back to say, "It will be for only a few days, and I'm sure you'll be comfortable there." Then he was gone, leaving Bella alone in the untidy house with the lights flaring on every detail of the disorder, and a clock ticking somewhere with elaborate and disapproving precision.

Bella rose and, removing her wraps mechanically, began to straighten things out. A sight of the dining room and kitchen made her smile, as she reflected that a mere man can mess up things considerably in the short space of twenty-four hours.

In the weeks that followed, Bella found life agreeable. She hunted up a servant for the Eglin household and mothered the lonely old gentleman as a good woman will always mother the distressed, of whatever age or condition. Mrs. Eglin's absence of a few days, lengthened out into a month and over. The unexpected expense of the hotel ate into Bella's spare funds, for she steadfastly resisted the Eglin's urging that she should be their guest there, as in their own house. The position she sought persistently evaded her. Several seemed on the point of materializing, but the fact that Bella was a married woman was against her. Of this she was unaware, and the sudden evaporation into nothingness of several rosy chances mystified her.

The people of Olmsby, at Mrs. Eglin's request, made

themselves agreeable. They paid stiff little calls, and begged Mrs. MacFallon not to be "formal." She was invited to several affairs, in which, strangely enough, formality appeared to be the main object. For Olmsby aped the city as far as its limitations permitted, and the electric-lighted afternoon functions might have had their scene in the dark drawing rooms of the city streets. Bella was disappointed. There is a certain ingenuous sociability that used to be characteristic of the village and the small town, sincere and unpretentious. Olmsby had lost its country heartiness. It was like a village belle on Fifth Avenue, arrayed in the best the department store could produce, and stiffly conscious of the fact. Olmsby was thrall to the club idea. It had frivolous bridge clubs, smart country clubs, and super-serious literary clubs made up, like an excursion train, of portentous "sections." The latter seemed to make a point of circling solemnly round and round without ever contemplating anything more vital than "The Bindings of the Early Gospels" or "The Influence of Chopin's Unhappy Loves upon the Modern Chromatic Scale."

The more abstruse and inconsequent the subject, the larger the attendance, and the more the Olmsby people tied their poor brains into bow knots over it. It seemed to be a sort of game, to choose dry far-away things to be lectured upon by an imported young man from the nearby city. And the Olmsbyites gladly endured an extraordinary amount of boredom, possibly the better to deserve the ample refreshments that followed! A sort of sublimated earning of their daily bread by the sweat of their intellect. From time to time an imported pianist — local "talent" was never allowed to speak above a whisper!

— was induced to come and wrestle with the Steinway Grand, while the audience thrilled as thrills the Spaniard at a bull fight, to hear its impotent and grinding protests under his heavy hand.

It was all, probably, a transition stage. The villagers were beginning to feel the stirrings of new processes — they had a hunger for solid things, after a long and placid diet of milk. But like the puppy at the same stage, they were deceived by mere solidity, and joyfully tackled rubber boots, discarded rope and other things that were neither immediately edible nor presently digestible.

After a few bouts of this kind of thing, Bella gave it up. She had a very good excuse in the small wardrobe at her command. Indeed, she felt shabby and behind the modes in this smart, city-country town. But she had enough new friends to keep her from being lonely. Her next-door neighbors were an old Quaker couple, who were extraordinary in their way and their history.

Mrs. Landis had been an only daughter, Mr. Landis an only son. Each was devotion itself to the parents. But love may have bonds as cruel as steel. And this parental strangle-hold kept the lovers apart for a generation. When the last of the four parents died, John Landis led Ellen, a white-haired old lady, with the timid, hesitating air of an obedient girl, over the threshold of his big house that had been empty and waiting for nearly twenty years.

Olmsby tittered and asked behind its hand, why old people made such fools of themselves! But the two lovers settled down to happiness as if it had been the only business of life. They were both modestly well off and could

have all they wanted. Their rose garden in the summertime was a riot of many colored bloom.

The first day Bella spent in Olmsby, the little Quakeress had watched her chance and handed over the fence a wonderful posy of cold-frame violets, with a shy "Does thee like flowers, neighbor?"

From then on, it was one succession of kindnesses. They took Bella for drives into the country, behind two fat horses, and nearly froze the marrow in her bones, used as she was to the dry cold of the North. They sent over mysterious napkin-covered dishes for her to "try." And, since Bella was no mean artist herself in that line, they exchanged things good to eat, and comfortably neighbored in all sorts of ways. This friendly intercourse kept Bella from being homesick for the people of Mipawan who had so long been her sole company.

Often, in the long quest that looked to the filling of a dwindling purse, she travelled to the city nearby, and wandered up and down the streets, jostling her way through the crowds and revelling in the racket. It was good to feel the urge and stress of a big city once more. It was a stimulus — a spur to ambition. The wilderness is for the hermit, so she told herself, who finding no further lessons from without, must seek salvation in himself — must digest the pabulum of the city in silence, aloof, before he opens the great book again.

Soon the veritable winter came. It was near Christmas. Snow had fallen. It had lain on the ground till it was as crisp as the frosting of a cake, and the soft new snow had superimposed itself, bringing that wonderful magnetic freshness into the air, that makes one want to dance and shout! — a sort of fine aerial cham-

page in which the sparkling bubbles still tingle and mount. Bella got into a short skirt and heavy boots and went for a tramp. A letter from Mipawan told her that they were snowed in—in the drifts nearly house-high, the lake thick frozen, no train for a week past. They missed her, and said so. The whole letter breathed the spirit of despairing, yet patient loneliness that the people of the North know. Bella breathed deep in a sudden overwhelming thankfulness that she was this side of the winter-long barrier—in a world of humans, more than she could ever know or want to know.

The trees were sparkling in the sun and the golden haze, that comes sometimes in the middle distance, made their branches look as if they were outlined in shining copper. The bare woods melted in a blue veil on the horizon. The path Bella ran along was dazzling, blinding-bright. The color glowed in her cheeks. She looked like a Christmas rose. The turquoise-matrix of her eyes lifted its brown veil and was frankly, frostily blue. She turned a sharp corner into a lane bordered with snow-laden firs—

Someone coming in the other direction all but blundered into her, his soft-rimmed hat pulled over his eyes against the wind—

“Why Billy!” she exclaimed in astonishment.

“*Mrs. MacFallon!*” He whispered it as if a thing beyond belief.

Even in the stress of the moment, she noticed the formal address and wondered at it. “What are you doing here?” she asked him, her hands outstretched in real pleasure.

He grasped them close. “We are marooned in Olmsby

for a while," he told her. Then turning and falling into step with her, he went her way. "It was like walking into a nice kind of dream, turning that corner and running into you," he said, adding in a low tone, "I was just thinking of you a thousand miles away. I can't realize yet that you're here."

"So flattered!" she commented, merrily. "I just happened *not* to be thinking of you at that moment, though I've thought of you many times since I came and wondered why you hadn't written."

The gravity of his face deepened. "We have — had a good deal of trouble of late. Uncle Pemberton has been ill, as you know. He has managed badly in business — lost a lot of money, and we have had to retrench in every way. The hardest — for the rest of them — was closing the town house and coming to a little place we have here, to stay till things improve."

"What! All of you here in this little village?" Bella exclaimed, adding, "Your sister must find it a trial to be away from her friends."

"Rather," Willoughby assented, drily, and Bella discerned the memory of unpleasant experience in the tone.

As if conscious of her intuition, he changed the subject. "And if one dared to question a heavenly vision," he began lightly, "how do you happen to be in Olmsby of all unlikely places in the round world?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Well, you see," she told him, "it was a wish and its immediate fulfillment. I possess a tiny fragment of Aladdin's wonderful lamp," she went on with mock seriousness. "And whenever I want anything badly enough to take the trouble, I rub it very gently, and the thing arrives." She laughed her meadow lark

laugh, her chin tilted whimsically, her eyes sparkling into his.

Van Haaven's somber face relaxed in a slow smile. "I wish," he said, "that you would lend that precious fragment to me for just one second."

"What would you wish?" Bella asked, brightly — then bit her lips in annoyance at the slip.

"I would wish myself into happiness," he answered her deliberately, and there was something in the tone that gave her warm heart a little pang.

She began a racy explanation of the why and wherefore of her coming, and what it had meant to her.

They had a good hour's tramp together before Bella had to turn back. Willoughby walked to the very door with her, reluctant to lose sight of her.

"Mayn't I ask my people to call on you?" he ventured as they parted.

"Do," she assented cordially. "I'd like to know them."

He took her hand in farewell. "It's been fine," he told her, "seeing you again. May I come and call too?"

"I'll quarrel with you, if you don't!" she assured him with pretended ferocity, and laughingly bade him adieu and vanished into the hotel.

CHAPTER IX

For Willoughby, Bella's appearance was the tantalizing vision of a foregone good. The question of marriage was an impossibility, even if he were able to persuade Bella to a divorce — a forlorn hope with a woman of her staunch principle. Pemberton's mismanagement had set the family finances back to a degree that seemed irretrievable. If Willoughby had ever dared to cherish dreams of transporting the woman he loved from the pinch of small means to the affluence that was his own life-long environment, the present crisis jarred him to a rude awakening.

Even in his thoughts he had long denied himself the endearing phrases in which an absent lover revels. Bella was no longer "my beloved girl," but the formal "Mrs. MacFallon" of the first few days of his acquaintance. Through the power of underlying thought, he had actually put her at a distance — deadened the pang of renunciation. Now, brought face to face, he felt the superb magnetism of her. She turned the focus of his dream camera to a painful "sharpness."

Yet he was human enough to thrill with the sense of her nearness, even though it meant genuine pain to him. Her parting clasp lay warm in his hand as he tramped home, and he had to fight hard to down visions of what might have been.

The place of present abode, to which the family had resigned themselves with not a very good grace, was an

old-fashioned country seat that had been in the Van Haaven family for years. They had chosen it for retreat partly because it was in an out-of-the-way locality, quite an ideal place to drop out of sight of too-inquiring friends and acquaintances. A roomy, dignified mansion with the high pillars and broad piazzas that one associates with the South, it was essentially a summer home. Now the snow covered its old-time gardens and hung thick on the box trees that bordered its paths.

Willoughby swung open the gate and went slowly up the path to the wide piazza. Segby, the butler, one of the few survivals of pomp and circumstances they had brought with them, saw him coming and opened the door, taking his hat and coat with a certain dignified flourish he used to call attention to any extra service. He was, like most of his mercenary kind, a snob of the first water. He felt keenly the adverse fortunes of the family — on his own account — the come-down battered his pride of place. But he remained. One could never tell when the Van Haaven fortunes would mend. So he gilded the refined gold of his manner to a servility that was little short of insulting. Willoughby's foot itched to plant itself at the point where the tails of his maroon coat swung loose from his body. Under the stress of circumstances little things annoyed Van Haaven, and this was one of them.

He pushed open the door to the library.

A roaring wood fire made the great room a place of flickering shadows and aromatic odor. In front of it, in a sort of glorified leather steamer chair, Allaine lay asleep.

Willoughby went in on tiptoe and stood with his back to the flame and his hands behind him. The delicate out-

line of her profile etched itself against the dark pillow. Her cheeks were flushed with the fire; and the full red lips, relaxed in sleep, the droop of the dark lashes, the yielding pose of the figure, gave a certain softness that her waking-self denied.

Allaine, like the rest of us, was the sum of her heredity and environment. And both had combined to bring out the worst in her nature. The Van Haavens were of heavy Dutch ancestry — undemonstrative and without warm emotions. And everything in her environment had confirmed and accentuated these traits. Strong-willed and selfish, she had always had her own way. And her choice of friends had been unfortunate — garish, innately vulgar young people, to whom money meant everything. With this "set" Allaine had whirled through the last few years of her "finishing" course, making as indifferent a record as her brother had achieved at college. But unlike the latter, she had no consolation in books, except those of the lightest and frothiest variety. And the molding experiences of Willoughby's life were, as yet, lacking in her own — love and the sorrow of love, and the amazing revelation of life in the rough, as he had seen it. For the first time Allaine knew adversity. And its initial effect was hardening — not enlightening, not mellowing. That would come later. Now it was too much to expect.

Willoughby's eyes rested on her with unusual interest. He told himself, with the matter-of-fact approval of a brother, that Allaine was "not bad looking." He had never admitted so much before. He suddenly woke to the consciousness that her eyes had opened and that she

was looking at him in her cool, almost insolent fashion, amused to find him absorbed in contemplation of her.

" Been asleep? " he asked.

Her red lips drew down discontentedly. " Nothing else to do in this dead old place." She sat up and put her hands to her disordered hair.

Willoughby ignored her remark. " Did Cyril come? " he inquired.

She shook her head. " He half promised to stay the week-end with the Jack Fosters. I guess they persuaded him."

Cyril had refused to be banished from the city merely because the family finances were precarious. Instead, he stayed at his club and accepted all the invitations that were showered on him, occasionally favoring the family with a short visit, when nothing better presented itself.

Silence fell between the two. Willoughby turned over in his mind how he should broach the subject of Bella to his aunts. He had no intention of asking his sister to call. He knew her too well. But he owed it to the woman he loved, to invite some civility from his people, uncongenial though they would probably be to her. He decided to tell them as little about Mrs. MacFallon as possible. After all, it was Bella's own business to reveal as much or as little of her affairs as she chose.

As he cogitated, Aunt Harriet entered, followed closely by Aunt Edwina. The latter carried Blinkie, a jet-black Pomeranian, under her arm. He was fussing to get down, whimpering and working all his tiny paws at once in the effort to escape.

Willoughby wheeled a chair up to the fire for each and

resumed his former place in front of the blaze. Blinkie, released, slid down, nosed as near to the fire as he could without actually singeing the fur off his hide and lay down with a sigh of intense satisfaction.

"Willoughby," said Aunt Harriet, "I wish you would go up and see your uncle. The nurse says she can't do anything with him." She looked up at him, shading her eyes from the bright light. She had a long, narrow face with hanging cheeks — jowls one might have called them in a man. She always looked as if she had just risen from the table after a heavy meal. There was a mental sluggishness apparent in her movements, in the unchanging expression of her countenance, in her slow speech and indistinct utterance. Yet in her bearing, in the expression of the cold black eyes under arched black brows, there was a hauteur that most people took for distinction. She had something of Allaine's disdain for all but her own small circle, but while it had a certain charm of audacity in the young girl, it was distinctly repellent in her aunt. One expects better of old age.

"I'll go up in a moment," Willoughby told her. He paused a moment, stroking Blinkie's back with the toe of his boot. "I met a friend here to-day," he announced. "A lady I knew up north, Mrs. MacFallon."

Even Allaine looked up in interest. Willoughby had never mentioned his adventures during the two years of his absence, and they had not asked him about them.

"Where did you say you met her?" Aunt Harriet asked.

"At the hotel, at a place called Mipawan," he answered, adding, "She is down here visiting a Mrs. Eglin, though just now she is at the Rosebush Inn."

"Eglin?" murmured Aunt Harriet. "Eglin?—I don't know her."

"They live next door to that big gray house on the main street, with the queer old garden around it," Willoughby explained.

"Oh, the Landis house," Miss Edwina threw in. "The Quakers."

"What about this—this—acquaintance of yours, Willoughby?" Miss Harriet asked with more interest than she had yet shown.

"I thought—if you happened to be in town—you might call on Mrs. MacFallon—show her some little attention," Willoughby returned a shade diffidently.

Miss Harriet settled back in her chair. "Oh!" she observed.

"Why not?" Miss Edwina demanded. She was short and plump, and fond of her nephew. "Willoughby's friend—of course we'll go!" As a matter of fact she welcomed any diversion at present, and she always opposed Harriet on principle.

"Oh, well—" Miss Harriet began, half inclined to yield.

But Allaine rose lazily and trailed out of the room without a word, leaving her brother as conscious as if she had put her thought into so many words that she would have nothing to do with the friends he happened to "pick up." He felt an unreasonable anger stir in him. But he shook it off, and with a murmured "Thanks. Mrs. MacFallon will be glad to see you," went upstairs to his uncle.

He found Pemberton in the thick of a wordy rebellion, stamping up and down the room, while the nurse followed

close on his heels, a glass of milk and egg in her hand. As Willoughby entered, his uncle addressed him irately.

"This woman," he announced with a sweeping gesture of his arm toward the nurse, "is trying to kill me!"

"Now Mr. Van Haaven!" the nurse exclaimed, reproachfully. "I'm only trying to give you your milk and egg. The doctor ordered it."

"The doctor ordered it!" Pemberton snorted. "The doctor orders too much. Every time I turn round, the doctor orders something I don't under any circumstances want! They wake me up in the middle of the night to take medicine, as if any fool doesn't know that sleep does more for a sick person than drugs!" He glared at his nephew as if he held him personally responsible.

Willoughby laid his hand on his uncle's arm. "Yes, I know," he began, sympathetically.

"I fully expect," Pemberton continued, turning his back on the nurse and the unwelcome draught, "I fully expect that at the next election I will not be allowed to vote as I wish. Some one will thrust a ballot under my nose and say 'The doctor orders you to vote for —'"

Willoughby smiled in his melancholy fashion. "If he does that, I'll 'tend to him," he assured his uncle. "Meanwhile, if he's advising the wrong thing for you, let's give it a trial and find out for ourselves. Don't be afraid," he added, patting Pemberton's shoulder. "If it kills you, I'll sue him for damages."

The invalid stood blinking up at him for a moment. Then he turned fiercely to the waiting nurse, and thrust out his hand. "Give me that glass!" he commanded loudly, and drained off the contents at a gulp.

After a few moments' conversation, Willoughby left the room.

The nurse followed him. "Excuse me, Mr. Van Haaven," she said deprecatingly, "but I'm afraid you'll have to look for another nurse."

"Good Heavens!" Willoughby exclaimed, dismally. "I thought you nurses were used to sick people."

Her lips tightened acidly.

"So we are," she assented. "But not like him."

"He is trying," Willoughby admitted.

"Trying!" she echoed. "I have to fight him every step of the way. I've lost six pounds in the few days I've been here. I need a nurse myself."

Willoughby sighed. "When do you want to go?" he asked.

"Perhaps I could stand it till to-morrow night," she returned. "But not a minute longer."

But the next night, when Willoughby came home, he found the nurse gone, and the new one he had engaged had not arrived. So he volunteered to spend the night on the couch in Uncle Pemberton's room.

The dawn of the next day found him marveling that the nurse had stayed so long. Pemberton had all the crankiness of a pig being driven the way it didn't wish to go. As Willoughby splashed in his morning tub, he figured that his uncle had used up enough nervous energy in the previous ten hours to have carried him through a solid week of the business he was not allowed to transact. Every dose of medicine had literally to be fought down his unwilling throat. Yet, once, when his nephew, seeing him sleeping quietly at the appointed time for medicine, thought to omit the dose, Pemberton came to himself

with a grunt, and chided Willoughby in no uncertain terms for neglect, insisting on the medicine then and there! He played with the gas too — it was too low — it was too high — it must be put out — it must be lighted again. And Willoughby, on the jump, obediently conformed to his whim of the moment, cursing the accident that had precipitated this catastrophe.

And as the last artistic touch to Pemberton's megrims, he popped his head off the pillow as his nephew went through the room on his way from his tub, to say in a tone of immense satisfaction, "We had a good night, hadn't we?"

Willoughby agreed languidly. If this had been a "good night" he prayed to be delivered from a bad one with Uncle Pemberton! And he no longer wondered at the endless procession of thin, fat, tall, short, old and young nurses who had come and gone in the months of his uncle's illness.

He mentioned the matter to Bella one evening and gave her an outline of the tribulations the whole family was going through. After they had talked a while about his uncle, he asked with an air of restrained interest, "Have my aunts called yet?"

Bella dimpled a little. "Yes," she said, "they have."

Willoughby pressed her for details.

They were sitting before a cosy, little grate fire, with the unlighted room in shadow behind them. She clasped her hands over her knee — the capable hands so smooth and white. "Let me see," she began reflectively. "It was the day before yesterday. It had snowed, and I got into rubber boots and a short skirt and cleaned the Eglin sidewalk off. It was such fun! And just as I was finish-

ing, a smart, little closed carriage drew up, and the man jumped off the box and was running up the path to the door when I stopped him. ‘There’s no one in there,’ I told him. ‘Mrs. Eglin is away.’

“So he opened the carriage door a crack and was telling the occupants what I had said, when it suddenly struck me from the glimpse I got of the older lady, that these were your aunts, and the Inn people had told them where to find me.” Bella stopped, smiling at something either pleasant or amusing, Willoughby hardly knew which.

“And then?” he asked gently.

“Then,” she began mysteriously, with a twinkle in her eyes, “then I had a temptation. There I was in boots and a short rowdy skirt, with a little soft hat stuck on the back of my head, and my face like a cabbage rose with the glow of working. And here were your dignified aunts on whom I did truly want to make a good impression. I might easily say nothing, in which case they would leave cards and depart without suspecting that ‘I was me.’”

“Well?” Willoughby prompted, softly. “What did you do?”

Bella threw back her head and laughed merrily. “What could I do, Billy, with the views I’ve got, but march up boldly to the carriage door and say, ‘I wonder if you’ve come to see me.’ And the older of the two looked up from my boots to my short skirt and up to my hat and down again, without a word. And I said, ‘Aren’t you Mr. Van Haaven’s aunts?’ And they said (very stiffly, Billy,) ‘We are.’ So then I said, ‘I’m Mrs. Mac-Fallon, and won’t you come in?’ ”

Willoughby looked thoughtful. Though it meant nothing vital to him, he wished that his aunts had met Bella under more conventional circumstances.

She divined his thought. "Don't worry, Billy," she reassured him. "They liked me—indeed they did. When they had sat down by this cheerful little fire for a while and had had a cup of tea and some tiny cakes the maid and I had made that very morning, they really seemed to limber up. So all was forgiven, and I'll return the call soon."

Willoughby sighed with relief. The matter, though trifling, had a greater bearing on the life he planned than Bella knew.

It was a few days after, that Bella swung up the avenue of elms that gave to the old mansion of Helmhold. She was in good spirits and looked her best. Her figure and carriage were of the kind that made the plain black tailored suit she wore seem like the apparel of a queen. She held her handsome head high, and there was an air of distinction about her that made even Segby undo an extra kink in his back as he ushered her into the old-fashioned drawing-room.

As she entered, someone slipped quietly out through another door — someone slim and tall and dark, whom Bella guessed was Billy's sister.

In a few minutes Miss Edwina came rustling down and greeted her cordially. Truth to tell, she was horribly bored and very glad of the diversion of a new face. She plunged at once into the subject that occupied her mind — Pemberton's illness and the growing difficulty of keeping anyone to attend to him.

"Five in the last two weeks!" she told Bella dramat-

ically. "And the new one who has just come has already been crying. He even took to calling her names, a thing Pemberton would never, never do if he were in his right state of mind!"

Bella sympathized as in duty bound, but she smiled over some of Pemberton's misdeeds — they showed such almost comical invention. She decided he needed the firm management of somebody with a saving sense of humor.

Presently Miss Harriet entered the room and greeted the caller. She was flustered about something and she kept looking toward the door in an anxious sort of way.

Miss Edwina had put the call upon a more sociable basis than would have been the case had the older sister come down first. She stopped talking of Pemberton and set herself to getting acquainted. The two together wormed out of Bella, without real rudeness, but by means of subtle questions and still more subtle silences, the fact that Captain MacFallon had been a lumberman. Bella did not consider it due further to inform them that he had committed the unpardonable sin of losing his money. So the mere sound of lumber being connected vaguely in the old ladies' minds with riches unspeakable, the atmosphere grew distinctly cosy, and they chatted amiably till she rose to go.

As she stood at the drawing-room door, bidding them adieu, there was a rush from the upper regions, and an elderly man with gray hair that stood wildly up on his head came down the stairs, wringing his hands and trying at the same time to hold up the skirt of his bath robe so that it would not trip his slippers feet. "I tell you," he declaimed in a trembling voice, "that pug-nosed

satellite of a murderous doctor must go! I will not stand her a moment longer!" He glared about him like a man bereft of the last atom of his patience.

A blue-and-white clad nurse fluttered down after him and stood trembling behind him, clasping and unclasping her hands. She spoke appealingly to Miss Harriet. "I'm sorry," she faltered, "but I can't make him mind —"

"Mind!" snorted the invalid. "Mind a little chit like that? I guess not!" He put his hands in the bathrobe pockets and took a few strides up the hall.

"Pemberton!" Miss Edwina said, in a worried way. "You'll get your death, wandering about this cold hall. Do go upstairs." She laid her hand on his arm.

He shook her hand off. "Oh, let me alone!" he returned rudely. He tripped over a length of bath robe. It seemed to increase his irritation.

Mrs. MacFallon looked from the worried, helpless women to the invalid. She had learned much from her husband's illness. It was not the time for conventionality. She hesitated an instant, then walked deliberately close up to Mr. Van Haaven. She picked up a fold of his gown and put it into his fingers.

"Hold this up," she said, "or you'll trip as you go upstairs."

He looked at her astonished.

Her face was sweetly grave and as calm as if this were in the ordinary routine of daily life. "Come!" she suggested — or was it commanded? Pemberton hardly knew. But while he considered, his eyes puckered without his glasses, and his obstinate head cockily on the side, her strong yet friendly hand urged him along, till before

he had time to protest, he was half way up the stairway, closely followed by the new apparition and his agitated sisters.

Midway of the upper hall, he turned and went docilely into his own room. Bella noticed that he shivered slightly. She tucked him up in the rug he had just quitted in his reclining chair by the grate. The nurse came into the room. She was tearful, poor young thing, though she tried manfully to hide it.

Bella turned to meet her. "Could you," she asked, "get Mr. Van Haaven a warm drink — malted milk, or something?" She looked at the nurse with such real comprehension and good fellowship, that the little thing brightened. "Sure I can!" she responded, and went out of the room.

When she returned, the nurse was quite willing to take up once more the burden of Van Haaven's tantrums. But Pemberton turned his back on her, like an unreasonable child and refused to take the steaming stuff she brought him. So it was Bella who took the glass and held it to his lips. Taught by experience, she steered clear of the usual phrase — "Take this!" — that he had fought tooth and nail for months. Instead she said evenly,

"Come, I want to wash this glass."

And meekly he obeyed, eyeing her curiously over the rim as he drank.

She betrayed no satisfaction when he had finished, only took the empty glass from him and going to the wash-stand in the corner of the room, washed and dried it without another glance at him.

In the doorway, behind Pemberton's back, Miss Edwina

and Miss Harriet hovered in amazement. The nurse lay off, as it were, on the lee bow, waiting for Pemberton's mood to change. Presently he caught sight of her.

"Go," he commanded with a sweep of his arm that implied vast distance

And she went.

He submitted meekly to Bella's ministrations and gazed after her with a sort of wistful curiosity as she bade him good-by and went down to finish her call.

In retrospect she felt her action had been more than a trifle unconventional. But the Misses Van Haaven were unusually warm — for them — in their appreciation of what she had done and, in the enthusiasm of the moment, hoped they might see her soon again.

But the incident turned Bella's thoughts back to a phase of her life that had been full of pain, and, all the way home to the village, her mind still wandered in the mists of it. How often had she turned the current of her husband's contradictory thought to necessary action, by a quick and unexpected twist! She felt sorry for Wiloughby's uncle that he had no one competent to manage him and thereby make him comfortable. Then, the subject being an unpleasant one, she dismissed it from her mind.

A week later Miss Harriet's carriage overtook her as she walked along a country road, and they had a little chat together. The poor lady's talk was all of Pemberton and the difficulty of getting anyone who could manage him. She seemed quite unhappy about it. And after she had driven on, she left the indefinite impression with Bella that she had been on the verge of asking — was it her advice in the matter? Certainly Miss Harriet had

stopped short of her intentions and had left something hanging in the air between them. Bella wondered vaguely what it was.

The next night Willoughby came to see her at the Inn. He looked haggard and worn, his eyes were blood-shot, and his hand, when it touched her in greeting, was hot and dry. Bella felt sorry for him, and not a little apprehensive. Her ready sympathy drew from him the story of his present stress.

He found it hard to attend to his uncle at night and have a clear head for business the following day. And he needed a clear head if he was to keep all the other heads in the family above water — financially speaking. The family wealth, as with so many of their class, was largely in real estate. At the time of the accident, Pemberton had been in several disastrous deals, loading himself up with utterly unproductive properties. Then to recoup, he had plunged in the stock market with the usual fatal results. It was from first to last, so unlike Pemberton's customary conservative, cautious conduct of financial affairs, that Willoughby was constrained to believe that his uncle's mental balance had been disturbed long before the accident. Now all his nephew could do was to sit tight, watch his chance to unload the dead wood and wait for a possible increase in other more likely holdings.

Meanwhile, Pemberton continued irascible to the last degree. He took such aversions to some of the nurses, that nothing they could do appeased him. He really needed a man nurse. But he refused to entertain the idea. And since much depended on his placid state of mind, his whims had to be met as nearly as might be. At

present, there was no help in sight. His sisters excited him unduly. They talked continually about family matters and bewailed the present stringency. It seemed to be the only thing in their minds.

Allaine, cool and selfish, was absolutely of no use in a sick room. So everything, at this juncture, devolved upon Willoughby. And he was getting the worst of the nightly vigils. That was only too plain.

After telling Bella his troubles, he pulled himself together, a trifle ashamed of seeming to complain.

"You'll vote me a deadly bore," he finished, "voicing this interminable tale of woe."

"By no means!" Bella exclaimed warmly. "I would consider it extremely unfriendly if you refused to share it with me. And anyway," she added, "I read it all in your face. You look as hopeless as a sinner on Judgment Day."

"As to that," he returned, trying to speak lightly, "long ago I discovered that every day is Judgment Day and once at least in every twenty-four hours we fall under its rocks."

It didn't sound like Willoughby, Bella thought, and she sensed a deeper growth in the man than appeared on the surface. But she made no response, and the conversation wandered into shallower channels. As they talked, Bella's mind, with the curious dual process that allows the consideration of two subjects at once, kept returning to Willoughby's predicament. Was there anything she could do for him further than merely cheering him when he came? Something began to take shape in her thought, something that connected what she had just

heard with Miss Harriet's vague remarks. Here she was, a woman in dire straits for money, searching for a position — it is true for something higher than the position of nurse. Why hesitate when there was something readily open to her, which would not only give relief to the man she sought to help, but also carry her through a difficult winter? But the position, of course, implied some uncomfortable phases, and an acute realization of these made Bella reluctant to make the move.

It was only when Willoughby was leaving, that she suddenly made up her mind. She watched him walk down the path to the gate. There was something in the weary droop of his shoulders, in the languor of his step, that decided her.

She flew to the door and opened it.

"Billy, oh, Billy!" she called after him.

He turned and came back, smiling up at her with tired but adoring eyes, as she stood on the step above him.

"How would you like me to take up your uncle's case — since I can manage him? You know I'm a good nurse, Billy," she added, breathlessly.

"How would I like it?" he repeated. And the thought uppermost in his mind was the joy of being once more under the same roof with the woman he loved. Quite secondary was the relief it would be to rest from the wearing task of taking care of Uncle Pemberton. "How would I like it?" he said again. "It would be—" He groped for a suitable word, but the glow that came into his face showed Bella what he felt.

She gave his shoulder a swift, decisive little pat. "There!" she exclaimed. "Say no more. Talk it over

with your people, and if they want me — I have to do something for a living just now — it might as well be that."

Willoughby's relief was pathetic. It seemed to him that Bella's proposition was the only way out of the difficulty. He was overwhelmed with gratitude. But later, as he walked home against the stinging November wind, he began to have qualms about it. He knew his Van Haavens, and the idea of having the woman he loved enter the family in the capacity of nurse was by no means agreeable to him. The thing was impossible.

The glow that had filled him, when Bella told him of her intention, died down, leaving him cold and hopelessly disappointed. He determined to see Bella the next evening and put the matter in its true light before her.

CHAPTER X

But before the evening of the next day came, Fate, with her usual disregard for the plans of her puppets, had pulled strings contrary to Willoughby's purpose.

For Bella, full of her new purpose, had a chance meeting with the two aunts in Olmsby. Once again she was struck with the feeling that they had something to ask of her that they hesitated to broach. And the persistence of their conversation about Pemberton and her wonderful management of him pointed the way for her — or seemed to point it.

Yet when, in her frank direct manner, Bella told them of what she had been thinking, touching very lightly but unmistakably upon her own financial stress, she was taken aback by their obvious amazement at her proposition.

Miss Harriet's black brows arched themselves till they touched the verge of her carefully dressed hair. Miss Edwina's little gray eyes, almost hidden by the folds of flesh around them, opened to their widest.

But after a moment of embarrassed silence, they expressed the utmost appreciation of Mrs. MacFallon's offer and begged her to come at once — they would send the carriage for her that very afternoon, if she agreed.

Then, with a constrained word or two about the weather and other banalities, they bade Mrs. MacFallon adieu and drove on.

Could Bella have lent ear to their conversation after

they left her, it is certain that, money or no money — stress or no stress — Willoughby or no Willoughby — she could not have been induced to accept the position of nurse to Pemberton Van Haaven! As it was, she wondered why her intuitions had led her so far astray in the interpretation of their vague advances to her. They surely had meant something — but what?

"Well, my dear," Miss Edwina said, in a scandalized tone, as they drove away, "what do you think of that?"

"Think how nearly —" Miss Harriet began —

"Fancy if we had!" Miss Edwina ejaculated with anguished imagination.

"Well — we didn't!" Miss Harriet bit off the words with immense satisfaction. "But who would have supposed —"

"She was a working person," Miss Edwina finished with a sniff.

"Let us be thankful," Miss Harriet said, judicially. "that she can come and —"

"Take care of poor Pemberton —" agreed Miss Edwina.

"We must treat her pleasantly," Miss Harriet went on with an eye to the possibilities, "for she strikes me as a person who —"

Miss Edwina nodded. "Yes — would give the whole thing up if she knew how we felt about her. We'll be — well — diplomatic. But afterward —"

Miss Harriet and Miss Edwina exchanged meaning glances.

Now the intention that had lain back of their vague phrases to Mrs. MacFallon was this — and quite worthy of the little minds that conceived it. They had seri-

ously considered asking Willoughby's friend to pay them a visit. And for this reason. They had seen her perfect control of the situation when Pemberton insisted upon parading through the hall in defiance of his nurse and everyone else. And they felt that if they invited Mrs. MacFallon to visit them, she would be on hand in any emergency to deal with the invalid. Of her good nature in the matter of giving assistance whenever it was needed, they had no doubt. It was, in fact (so Edwina confided to Harriet) the first thing that inclined her to suspect that all was not well socially with Mrs. MacFallon. For their idea of anyone really worth while, was of one who, having access to a bottomless purse, could be rude and overbearing with grace. Undoubtedly, Mrs. MacFallon was too polite and agreeable to qualify to this measure — Miss Edwina had known it all the time!

"Didn't Willoughby say there were steamers on that lake up north?" Miss Harriet asked, turning the point at issue with a view of discounting her sister's triumph.

"Yes — I think so."

"Then," Miss Harriet deduced with portentous logic, "her husband was" — she lowered her voice tragically — "a captain on one of them!"

"Of course!" Miss Edwina returned drily. "Had you fancied she was in naval circles?"

When Willoughby reached home that night, he was aghast to find Bella already established in attendance upon his uncle. He questioned her and his aunts closely as to the chance that had brought it about. And since Bella had determined to make the best of the situation and the two aunts were on their guard, he discovered nothing disturbing. And, to his subsequent relief, the

latter were on their best behavior and they treated Mrs. MacFallon as "pleasantly" as they had promised each other in that pregnant interview in the carriage.

But in their comfortable asides, when Mrs. MacFallon was not present, the two despised her to their hearts' content. "Did you notice—?" Miss Edwina would ask of her sister. "I should say I did!" Miss Harriet would reply. And the two lovely ladies would nod agreement as to the particular disparaging point to be deduced from that special eccentricity of Bella's behavior.

Under Mrs. MacFallon's firm rule, the invalid became another person. She never argued with him — never drew out resistance to her commands — never quoted the bitterly hated doctor. Pemberton found himself obeying her, even while he wondered why he obeyed.

Willoughby watched, one Sunday early in March, the way Bella made Pemberton take his outdoor walk which he detested. He came downstairs protesting at every step — it was a bad day with him. Mrs. MacFallon, followed him, to the hall.

"I certainly won't stir out to-day," Pemberton announced.

Mrs. MacFallon snatched up his overcoat. "Very well," she said, pleasantly, as if agreeing with him. "Now here's your coat — that's right! Here's your hat — yes. Here's your stick — and out you go!" With the last word she opened the hall door and pushing him gently out, closed it after him and turned to Willoughby with a whimsical little smile.

"It's wonderful!" Willoughby commented. "I don't see how you do it." He looked out of the window at his uncle's retreating figure. And as the young fellow

watched, Bella took new note of him. He stood firmer on his feet than when she had first known him. His dark, melancholy face was full of quiet confidence. The chin and jaw jutted more. The line of the mouth was straighter. Two deep wrinkles had carved themselves upright between his eyes. Bella felt the pleasure one has in any growing thing, and good wishes rose warmly in her heart for him.

It was a few mornings afterward. Willoughby had already gone to the city. The rest of the family sat round the breakfast table in the silent uncommunicative mood that prevails before the morning coffee. Segby came in solemnly bearing a sheaf of letters on a tray. Miss Edwina distributed them. Presently there was an exclamation of pleasure from Bella.

Everybody looked up.

"I have good news," she said. "My cousin Hicks from Ireland has arrived in New York. He is coming to see me." She looked around the table, her blue-brown eyes sparkling.

No one spoke for a moment.

Segby flattened himself against the wall behind Miss Harriet. The faintest expression of disdain flickered across his face.

Miss Harriet leaned forward. "Your cousin — Hicks?" she questioned. "And from — Ireland, you say?" Her voice sounded shocked. Miss Harriet had the idea that no one came from that ill-starred place, but to seek service in American families. The very name of it made her sniff disapproval. Her black eyebrows arched themselves.

Miss Edwina came out of her letter with a start.

"What did you say his name is?" she asked, conscious of tension in the atmosphere.

"His name is—" Bella paused and looked down at the sheet in her hand, dimpling a little at the sight of the two shocked old faces. "His name is John O'Neill, but we call him Hicks for short."

"Oh," Miss Harriet commented. She could put more into that little syllable than anyone, possibly, had ever put into it since the beginning of time.

Miss Edwina returned to her letter in silence.

Really, Mrs. MacFallon's "news" held uncomfortable possibilities. "Hicks," "Ireland," "cousin"—the combination sounded like a policeman coming to visit the maid!

Allaine's lips curled in a rather unpleasant smile. As a rule she ignored Mrs. MacFallon. It was the easiest and safest way. She and the family benefactor had nothing in common. It annoyed the young girl vaguely that her continual coolness seemed to draw no resentment from the visitor. She seemed, indeed, quite unaware of it. Allaine thought her obtuse.

There was an uncomfortable flutter in the air that might have been apparent to anyone, yet Bella sat reading her letter with a look of pleasure and absolute forgetfulness of her unfriendly surroundings. Presently she looked up. Miss Harriet's eyebrows still soared unduly, and her sister's mouth was pursed to the size of a button-hole, with disapproval. Allaine, toying languidly with her breakfast, smiled unpleasantly. Segby, flattened against the wall, managed to maintain an expression of respectful disdain (if one might combine the two words) though his face was servant-grave and calm.

Bella's serene gaze took it all in. She was aware of the probable thought that agitated them. Their evidences of small caliber continually amused her. Sometimes she found a little pathos in their snobbery. This time, a smile of pure humor flashed over her face. She struggled manfully with a laugh. "Of course," she informed them, still twinkling, "they will put up at the Rosebush Inn, here in Olmsby, where I can see them often."

"They?" Miss Harriet's tone of inquiry matched her elevated brows.

"My cousin and his friend, Mr. Egbert Holbroke."

Miss Harriet's brows came down an infinitesimal degree. "Oh!" she observed slightly mollified. The name had rather a nice sound. Perhaps the cousin traveled with a wealthy man as a companion or secretary. She was relieved to know that Mrs. MacFallon was not thinking of anything so preposterous as entertaining them at Helmshold. She exchanged a discreet glance with Edwina — a glance which later, in their own room, they put into words. "I hope she won't let them call on her here — so demoralizing for the servants!"

Almost a week later, in the mid of the morning, a taxi rolled up to the door and out of it came — the one impetuously, the other more deliberately, two young men.

Pemberton happened to be taking his walk on the piazza. They advanced to the edge of the steps and saluted him with the deference young men of good heart show toward an older one.

"They told us in the village," the younger one said, "that Mrs. MacFallon was here." He paused inquisitorily.

Before the invalid could answer, the door opened and Segby stood on the threshold.

The young man transferred his question to the maroon apparition who bowed and stood aside to let them in. Now Segby's teeth were of the falsest variety known to dentistry and sometimes the upper and lower sets clinched together leaving him speechless. So it was in the present instance. But the silence, backed by his lofty manner, was impressive.

He showed them — not into the drawing-room — but into the library on the opposite side of the hall. For, he reasoned to himself, these were the Irishmen of whom Mrs. MacFallon had spoken. Segby knew to a dot, as a good servant should, the financial and social status of all the Van Haaven circle and the exact amount of deference due to each one. In the case of strangers, he took a rapid but furtive inventory of their clothes and their manner and acted accordingly. These young men were dressed in rough tweeds. He had also the remembrance of the conversation in the dining room a week before to guide him. They were evidently in line for what Segby called "the frosty flipper."

The room into which they were ushered seemed empty. But behind the lace curtain of the far window, whose outside shutter was closed, leaving the sill in gloom, a pair of hazel eyes gazed superciliously on the intruders.

In a moment Bella came down. "Now Hicks!" she exclaimed reproachfully. "Why didn't you wait at the inn, as I told you, till I came?"

He took her hands and kissed her with the unembarrassed warmth of a brother. "I just couldn't," he explained briefly.

Allaine, watching from her hiding place, where their sudden entry had trapped her, thought it a disgusting exhibition!

Hicks was a fair young man of medium height, athletic-looking, ruddy, clean-shaven. His eyes shone out of his brick-colored face as frosty blue stars in a sunset. The gray suit he wore brought out all his color and made him look brickier than ever. He was the faintest bit bow-legged, like a man who has ridden much. And it added the last touch of geniality — as of a man standing with his back to a blazing fire, his hands under his coat tails.

Allaine epitomised him, in a short, scornful sentence, as a man who "would make friends with anybody!"

His friend, Egbert Holbroke, was a complete contrast to him. He was more like a grave Spanish Don than an Englishman — very tall, very dark, with a finely cut profile, and great masses of thick blue-black hair. His shoulders drooped a little in a bookish sort of way. His attire was notably plain, but a magnificent diamond blazed on his long, thin hand. His eyes were so velvet-dark that the pupils blended into the iris. He held Mrs. Mac-Fallon's hand for a moment, smiling gravely down at her, but he spoke so softly that even the keen ears behind the curtain could not catch what he said.

"Why the embargo on our coming here, Bella mia?" Hicks asked curiously, looking about him as if he expected to find the answer written on the walls. His eye rested a moment on the darkened window. The lace of the curtain bulged a little. He wondered —

"You dear dolt!" Bella returned. "Didn't I tell you enough in my last letter to give you a glimpse into the situation?"

" You did," he admitted promptly. " But it sounded like a fairy story — we didn't believe it, did we, Holbroke? "

" Only little bits of it," Holbrook qualified. " We know your propensity for throwing the conventionalities to the wind to play good angel to the distressed."

" That much we credited," Hicks went on, " but that anybody should —"

" Hush," she adjured him, her finger on her lips. " I don't mind it a bit — it's funny sometimes, as I told you. I simply had to come, and I'm glad I did come. I'll stick it out as long as my patient needs me. Meanwhile," she added whimsically, " I'm a combination of hireling and guest, and I hardly know whether to ask for a Thursday out, or to invite Miss Harriet to luncheon at the Ritz-Carleton! "

" What a lark!" O'Neill said, laughing.

While they stood talking, Miss Edwina entered, peered about and was made acquainted with the newcomers. She was " taken " with Holbroke's looks and also with his name, which she characterized to herself as distinguished. The cousin she passed over with a word. He was not, she was relieved to note, " so bad as she had supposed," though of course —

She sat down and motioned Holbroke to a seat beside her in the dictatorial way that old ladies acquire, particularly if they have a good conceit of themselves to begin with. Both she and her sister were immensely interested in the great world beyond the " pond," as those who love to patronize Nature delight in calling it — but they were afraid of the water, and they had such delicate — such very delicate stomachs! So she pumped the young Eng-

lishman with question after question; but was puzzled afterward to remember how little information she had gained, particularly about personal matters. Holbroke had, in fact, a certain silent way about him, that left any question hanging in the air if he did not care to provide the answer.

On Miss Edwina's part, she delicately warned Holbroke against sullying himself with the society of the Olmsby people.

Poor Miss Edwina had fallen on evil days. She was lonely and excessively bored, yet refused to have anything to do with the Olmsbyites. Years before, when she was a young girl, the Van Haaven family had spent a summer at Helmshold. All season, their rich friends — people of their own set — had come and gone, leaving plain countrified Olmsby electrified with their splendor. The older people of the town well remembered the gorgeous four-in-hand coach which brought them through the wide main highway of the village, a liveried flunkie on the box and a mellow tally-ho horn in full blast. The fanfare used to bring all the people to their doors to listen and to behold the splendid sight.

Miss Edwina, with the memory of triumphal progress through the town in a dead and gone summer, spurned all efforts of the residents to entice her into their company. Several fluttery ladies called and left notice of the activities of the literary and musical sections — lectures dealing avidly with such indispensables as Wagner and Transcendentalism, The Fauna of Southern Guiana, and The Esoteric Meaning of Korean Art.

The subjects tempted Miss Edwina bitterly. But she held fast. And she knew the utter loneliness that they

know who put ideals above desire. To keep in her own social class was not a high ideal, but it was the highest she had. All this is to explain her cordiality to the new young man; as he came from afar and would depart anon, he was as uncompromising to Miss Edwina's social caste as the transient acquaintance one permits oneself en route by a slow steamer or in the midst of a desert — that passes the time agreeably, yet may be dropped on arrival, and never again remembered.

'As they talked, Miss Edwina and Mr. Holbroke at one end of the room and Hicks and Mrs. MacFallon at the other, with the disgusted Allaine growing more and more chilly behind the curtain, Pemberton finished his constitutional and came into the drawing-room, peering about him curiously. He saw Bella and Hicks and made straightway for the former — she drew him, these days, as a magnet coaxes a sliver of steel. The young man rose and gently compelled the old man into his chair. Whereupon Pemberton took another look at him — the action was like Mrs. MacFallon, and like everything she did, roused not one spark of opposition in him. Inside of five minutes he liked Hicks. Inside of ten, he invited the young man to come and stay as long as he could. This was as unlike the normal Pemberton Van Haaven as anything could be. Hicks refused as tactfully as possible. But when they rose to go a few minutes later, the invalid insisted on their remaining to luncheon, showing considerable heat in the matter. Both men bowed their acknowledgments, but they were willing, it seemed, to forego the honor.

While Bella chafed, waiting impatiently for them to be gone, endorsement came from an unexpected quarter.

Miss Edwina urged their acceptance, if merely to satisfy the invalid.

And since she put it on that particular ground and backed it up by an evident desire on her own part to have them, they accepted gracefully, not sorry to have a little longer time with Bella.

Now it happened that Pemberton suddenly missed his stick and made a dive into the hall and onto the piazza for it, leaving the door open behind him. The draught came in strongly for the moment. Bella being nearest, rose to close it, leaving Hicks alone at the end of the room.

As he looked about him, the lace at the darkened window swayed with the wind. At the same moment a muffled sneeze sounded from behind it. The young man's eyes opened wide in surprise. The idea of sneezers ambushed in a library was a novel one. He had suspected that bulging curtain though—dimly. At once comprehension came to him. It was a feminine sneeze, that was certain. Also, it had a young sound, why he could not have told. Here was someone, probably the daughter of the house, of whom Bella had written in one of her letters, trapped behind the curtain by their presence in the library. Therefore—

He rose deliberately and walked the length of the room to the window directly opposite to the one which contained the lady in distress. He stood looking at the snow-covered garden. As soon as he heard the hall door close, and Pemberton and Bella re-enter the room, he gave vent to a loud exclamation!

“What’s this?” he cried. “Come and look!”

They all rushed to the window, while the resourceful Hicks pointed out to them a strange looking object in the

middle distance — was it a bird? “There! — to the left of the bush by the gate — See!”

They peered out and obligingly tried to name the object, which nobody but Hicks seemed to see. But he was patience itself, and pointed it out painstakingly again, till, to his ear keenly attentive, there came faintly the closing of a door.

Then, with a jolly laugh, he announced that after all, he believed it was a crooked branch of the tree at the other side of the road.

It was not till they were all seated at the luncheon table and the two young men had been presented to Miss Harriet, that Allaine trailed in and stood a moment, her back to the door, looking about her. She was dressed in a green velvet frock, which in spite of the touch of fur at the neck and sleeves, looked cool, like the green in the hollow of a wave. A barbaric Russian clasp caught it at the waist, the aquamarines flashing insolently from the dull hammered gold of the setting. Her dark shining hair was caught up on the top of her small head with a gold dagger-pin — Russian, too. And though she had been at great pains to “dress the part” she intended to play, the effect was as of a careless unpremeditation — a rich undress.

The smooth olive of her cheeks was slightly flushed. She looked charming, and she was well aware of the fact.

Hicks stared with all his eyes!

And since his seat at the table was just opposite her own, he had a very fair chance to keep on staring. He felt sure that Allaine was perfectly cognizant of the fact that he had been conscious of her predicament and deliberately planned her rescue. But if he expected grati-

tude, he was doomed to disappointment. Beyond a slight flicker of her eyelids when Hicks was presented to her, she gave no further sign; and when the young man subsequently addressed her, she begged him to repeat his remark, with a delicate air of recalling her thoughts from a distant and more congenial sphere. And it was all done with a spurious and exquisite embarrassment at having been so discourteous as to forget his presence.

It wellnigh deceived the genial young man. He felt chap-fallen to be making so unwontedly poor an impression. He looked enviously across the table at her as she engaged his friend in a languid conversation. Holbrooke seemed to be making friends with this very peculiar young woman. Hicks wondered why. Suddenly as Allaine cast her eyes demurely down on her plate while begging his pardon for not having caught his last remark, Hicks glimpsed a downright wicked look in her cool brown eyes, as well as a furtive smile that lurked in the corners of her scarlet lips.

Then, indeed, Mr. John O'Neill took an instant resolution. From that moment he became absolutely oblivious to her — looked over her head at a picture on the opposite wall, looked to one side of her, looked right through her, looked everywhere, in fact, except at her. And gradually, without anyone's being aware how it was done, he drew all the rest of the tableful into conversation with him. Soon he was deep in a lively story of an adventure that had fallen him in a far-away corner of the world, which made even Miss Harriet sit up and take note.

"You have hunted a good deal, I suppose," Miss Edwina ventured. Not that she was particularly interested in the chase, but she had always vaguely understood

that all Englishmen were given to slaughter, and for the moment she had forgotten that Hicks was Irish and, therefore, presumably not in line for gentlemen's sports.

Mr. O'Neill shook his head. "The only thing I ever killed," he told her, with an air of regret as at an uncontrollable weakness, "was when I was in Texas, years ago. I took a pot-shot at a jack rabbit, and hit it. You know," he went on, getting enthusiastic, "they can run like — that is, they run very fast. It turned a somersault and lay still. I picked it up. It was stone dead. And suddenly that limp thing lying on my hand meant only one thing to me."

"Pot-pie," Allaine murmured.

Hicks flushed, but he gave no other sign that her words had reached him. "A moment before, that little beast had been a wonderful machine. I had spoiled it — put it out of business for good." He looked around the table. Miss Harriet was devoting herself to her sweetbread. Miss Edwina sipped claret with the air of profound meditation with which she listened to lectures on The Reality of Nothingness. Holbroke, his gaze fastened with still intentness on Allaine, had not heard a word O'Neill said. Allaine maintained an appearance of being aloof and out of earshot. Remained then, only Bella, who nodded understandingly, her blue-brown eyes soft with comprehension.

It was to her that Hicks made his final remark about Bre'r Rabbit. "And since then," he said, "I would as soon put sand in the bearings of a fine engine, for the pleasure of hearing it grate and come to a standstill, as take the life of anything — bird or beast."

There was silence for the space of a few heartbeats,

then Miss Edwina, who still preserved her air of concentrating her mind on a knotty problem, said, "Well, I've heard that same thing before — though I don't know who told me — that the western rabbit hadn't half the flavor of the ones we shoot right here in our woods."

Silence again. Broken this time, by the faint tinkle of a laugh from Allaine's side of the table.

If she had thought to tantalize the young Irishman, she failed of her purpose, for Hicks joined in heartily. Now Mr. O'Neill had a jolly laugh that always sounded several sizes too big for him. Generally, people who heard it for the first time stopped laughing themselves, just to listen. It seemed to come from the depths of a fathomless good nature — to be warrant of infinite kindness and a boundless capacity for mirth.

Miss Edwina gazed about her in some surprise. What the joke was, she hadn't the least idea. But her sense of humor was a negligible quantity, as was Miss Harriet's, and she rarely troubled to inquire into a joke. It usually passed quickly, she noticed, and never, so far as she could judge, repaid investigation anyhow. So she looked on calmly till the merriment subsided. Then she added further information for Mr. O'Neill. "I like them best in a ragout, with sherry," she announced amiably.

Fortunately for gravity, Miss Harriet rose and luncheon was at an end. Hicks, standing beside the door to let the ladies pass, followed with his eyes Allaine's undulant movement as she went down the hall in the wake of the aunts. She was like an Undine before the gift of a soul, he thought. They walked into the library.

But Allaine turned and went deliberately upstairs. Nor did she come down again while the visitors remained.

CHAPTER XI

In the weeks that followed, the two men fairly won their way into Olmsby society, without in the least meaning to do so, and despite Miss Edwina's warning to the contrary. Young men were none too plentiful in the little town. Followed, therefore, luncheons, card parties, musicales, dances and all other activities of the village to which they were duly invited.

In an incredibly short time, the young ladies of Olmsby had decided that Mr. Holbroke was "too splendid for anything," and Mr. O'Neill was lively and "lots of fun." Also, that the former was "romantic" and the one to fall in love with, while the latter was the one for one's lighter moods — in a word, when any fun was on hand. The tall, Spanish-dark Holbroke, with his reserved manner, his slow self-contained speech and a certain hauteur he interposed when people tried to be super-friendly, had the effect on the girls of fruit out of reach. As for Holbroke himself, he liked American girls. They were awfully jolly, he thought. But he was pre-eminently a bookish man, caring little for women, and he hardly troubled to show his liking. Olmsby stood a trifle in awe of him.

O'Neill became a general favorite. He was a man to make friends wherever he went, on the time-honored theory that the lamb loved Mary, 'cause Mary loved the lamb. His motto seemed to be, as in fact he once declared, "Everybody's a good sort when you get to know

'em!" Even the colored folks, with whom the village overflowed, were all smiles when the young Irishman hove in sight.

The two men were different in every way, even in the matter of their dancing. Whereas Holbroke danced as gravely as an Indian, used his feet solemnly and had hard work with the newer steps, they came to Hicks as easily as breathing. No sooner did he see a step than it was his to dance — as if it had entered in at his eyes and come out at his feet.

As to other accomplishments, Holbroke played finely, even brilliantly, and O'Neill sang delightfully in a mellow baritone that came out well in a rough sea song, yet adapted itself easily to a tender love song. He sang Debussy songs and Cockney comics with equal art, to the great delight of the frivolous younger set, and the disapproval of those who took "music" "seriously."

Altogether both men gave and received a great deal of pleasure.

But, though rumors of very good times indeed, in the little town, sifted through to Allaine's ears, she kept aloof, growing more discontented every day. Her aunts bored her excessively with their constant tales of past grandeur in that very mansion, and their lamentations over the present calamity, yet Allaine held their views in the matter of mixing with the village people. She preferred to be lonely rather than go out of her "set." She was like the princess in a fairy tale, imprisoned in the tower of her own pride.

Presently two things happened. In the first place, a secret transpired — as the best of secrets will under extreme provocation. How, nobody knew. Simply it

transpired — oozed out of its hiding place and so into the village consciousness and a trifle of a mile beyond. It was a secret so tremendous, so once-in-a-lifetime, so highly romantic, that it was on everybody's tongue — in whispers! Yet no one seemed to have the courage to ask a direct question of the one most concerned in it.

In the second place, it was at this precise juncture that Allaine Van Haaven condescended to Olmsby with a certain belated alacrity — if one might use such a word in describing the way that languid young woman swam into the village society.

It was at a dance at the Olmsby Country Club. All the younger set were there. There was the usual small orchestra hidden behind the usual forest of palms; the usual bevy of sweet young things ascending the staircase, disclosing glimpses of slim silk ankles, in "all the evening shades." There was also the usual group of young men, waiting about, wrestling with white gloves, and casting anxious glances at the door of the ladies' dressing-room.

It was characteristic of the two visitors, that O'Neill should have saddled himself with a plain little girl from the lonely end of the town. She kept him waiting in a chilly parlor an unconscionable time. Hicks chafed. Perhaps he did more — there was no one to hear a comment or two if it did escape. But when the girl finally appeared, he was so relieved that he tucked her hand comfortably under his arm and walked down the street as happily as if she had been ready on the dot.

A little later, he joined the ranks of the wait-abouts at the foot of the stairs. A group of men stood near, resting and cooling off between dances. The orchestra

had stopped playing for the moment. A buzz of voices in the big room beyond filled in the gap. Faint snatches of laughter — someone close at hand whistling the tune of the last dance. O'Neill was struggling to put the final thumb into its place and to button his glove.

"Whew!" The man beside him just breathed it, his elbow in Hicks' ribs.

O'Neill's eyes traveled up the stairway. The bright lights caught the point of a silver slipper, making it sparkle like a star in transit. The draperies above it were cloth of silver and airy stuff of the blue of ice in shadow. O'Neill smiled with an artist's pleasure. A moment more, and the wearer's face was on a level with his own — the cool, provocative face of Allaine Van Haaven!

She passed him with a negligent bow, joining a few paces beyond, a man who, from his resemblance to her, O'Neill guessed to be a relative, though considerably older. Holbroke later introduced him as Cyril Van Haaven, Allaine's uncle. He was one of the most lackadaisical men Hicks had ever seen. He had prominent gray eyes — they popped, in fact. And when he entered a room, they roved from one side to the other, making him look like a greedy fish swimming into a pool. Though he was thin to attenuity, he looked as if he had just risen from the table, and two deep creases on each side of his mouth confirmed the impression of gourmanderie. He was exquisitely dressed, almost to the point of the dapper. And he had the unpleasant habit of running his bulgy eyes over a new acquaintance in an open appraisal that was little short of rudeness. He appeared to have taken a fancy to Holbroke. With Allaine, the two formed an unbroken trio nearly the whole evening.

O'Neill watched them wistfully, bound as he was to the girl he had brought. He found it difficult to get other partners for her, and so dutifully danced with her, escaping occasionally for the last half of a dance with someone else.

He determined to have at least one dance with the "Ice Princess," as he called Allaine in his thoughts. He would compass it, though the skies—or the ceiling of the ball-room—fell! But fate was against him. The evening passed without bringing him the vestige of a chance. Then at the very last, when all the dancers joined in for the "Paul Jones," the magic whistle sounded as Allaine's finger tips touched his. She half turned to dance with the man behind her, whose hand still grasped hers. But O'Neill seized her with determination. Before she knew it, she was swung round masterfully, in step with the most exquisite dancer she had ever met.

The whistle sounded all too soon. Reluctantly he surrendered Allaine to the moving chain. And it was a tribute to his skill, that in subsequent affairs at which they met Allaine proved not unwilling to bestow an occasional dance upon him, much as she appeared to dislike him.

She looked that night the incarnation of Pride—O'Neill thought—with her frosty silver draperies and the ice-blue chiffon that floated over them. That Pride which was the keynote of her character—haughty, selfish pride. And yet, disagreeable as the trait was to a man whose whole nature was precisely the reverse, O'Neill was conscious of a warm feeling of pity for her. He was conscious of something else as well, that troubled him not a little. And when, a little after Allaine had

gone home with Holbroke as escort, Bella and Willoughby looked in on their way from a card party, Hicks hailed his cousin with genuine relief — she was so different — so kindly, so overflowing with good fellowship! He felt the need of her at that moment.

She opened her blue-brown eyes at him. There was an expression in Hicks' face she had never seen there before. She was puzzled by it. The only conclusion clear to her was, that it wasn't like Hicks.

He twinkled back at her, understanding her thought. And since he was waiting for the plain girl for the third time that night, he would fain have drawn Bella to a secluded corner, away from her escort, and confided the astounding fact that had just dawned on him. But Bella saw his intention and said, "To-morrow, Hicks dear, you can come for a walk with me. But Billy must get home and to bed."

Willoughby was much in Mrs. MacFallon's society these days, and he insisted on regarding her presence in the house as a visit. He held himself well in hand. Not by a word or glance did he remind the woman he loved of the feeling that had grown to be part of him. He went doggedly about the business of holding together the family fortunes. This was a harder task since he had less help in the office than usual. They had cut down all expenses possible. He was bitterly overworked and he showed it in his haggard face and the weary abstraction of his manner. Sometimes as he sat in the train coming home from the city, drooping with fatigue, the whole thing seemed hardly worth the struggle. To spend soul and body to conserve and build up a fortune to be spent lavishly for utterly unnecessary things — for

the mere fluff and froth of social existence, and for people too helpless to stretch out a hand for themselves and too selfish to realize what was being done for them — this was the irony of life at present and of all his endeavors. For Willoughby had been down to the bed rock of things material and he could not forget it.

He longed with all his tired mind and body for the peace and simplicity of Mipawan. Yet, since he was in the treadmill, he braced up and did his best. He sometimes envied the ordinary workman who was not afraid to live in a little house, to wear plain clothes, eat plain food and do plain things. Most of these reflections were, had he known it, merely symptoms of profound nervous depression. The normal Willoughby enjoyed the fruits of wealth as well as the next man, though they were not the whole of life to him, as they were to his relatives.

Particularly did he feel himself uninteresting to Bella or to any other woman in his present state of mind and affair. But had he known it, the woman of his heart was by way of taking a maternal interest in him — the most dangerous mood for any woman who wishes to keep heart-free. For in nine cases out of ten a woman's love for the man is largely of the same stuff as that she gives to the child, and springs from her desire to help him. This is the instinct that draws a woman towards the weakling, the cripple, the man red-haired or cross-eyed. The man whom the merely feminine woman throws on the discard heap the womanly woman picks up and brushes off, and then kisses the bruise and the scratch to make it well. It seems an unreasonable state of mind, not to say comic, but it ultimately turns out well for the man concerned, and the woman gets more genuine fun

out of reconstructing the man of her choice, than the Maker of worlds in setting a wobbly little planet on its legs and starting it in its orbit.

Though Bella had left the Van Haaven house when her cousin arrived, she still kept the unruly Pemberton under her immediate eye. Otherwise he balked, refused to take his medicine or his walks, and his two sisters, after fussing with him, would rush to the telephone and beg Mrs. MacFallon to come up and "speak to him."

O'Neill, soon after his arrival, drew from Bella the story of her diminished income. He was shocked and indignant with her for not having called on him to help her out. He demanded — not to say commanded — that she leave the Van Haavens instanter! But this she refused, remaining firm to the duty she had undertaken. And finding that he could not move her from this position, O'Neill reluctantly desisted from further argument. But he insisted on his right as her nearest relative to bolster up her finances whenever they needed it. There was no gainsaying the fact that his presence relieved her mind considerably. Altogether it was a very different winter from the one that seemed to stretch before her as she crouched beside the wind-swept rock on the hill and opened Mrs. Eglin's letter.

It was nearly a week before the promised walk with her cousin came about. As they strolled up the main street Hicks talked the commonplaces of every day, with light-hearted ease. Bella fancied he had forgotten what troubled him the week before. Yet she had been reasonably sure, from his expression then, that he had got into a scrape and wanted to "'fess up," as in the years past. The two had helped each other out of holes ever

since they were youngsters. Bella felt reassured now, as she listened to Hicks' whimsical résumé of things social in Olmsby.

But as they swung into the snow-covered road that led out of town, leaving the houses behind them, a sudden gravity fell upon the young man.

Bella stole a glance at him from under her fur-trimmed hat. He was looking straight ahead of him, frowning a little, his lips slightly compressed. Bella sighed. She knew the signs. Hicks was in trouble after all and considering the best way to begin and tell her about it. What could it be? She hoped it was no gap in his friendship with Holbroke — the latter went about with Cyril Van Haaven a good deal these days — perhaps after all, it was nothing serious. But Hicks' expression —

"Bella mia," he announced, turning to her abruptly, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, "I'm in love."

"In heaven's name!" Bella exclaimed. "With whom?" Her mind darted swiftly over all the numerous girls of Olmsby. He had danced, walked, played bridge, skated with about thirty of them, as nearly as Bella could remember. Which one had thrown the net over the genial Hicks? She turned to him, breathless with curiosity, instinctively thinking of the most unlikely. "Not the plain little girl you took to the dance?"

O'Neill shook his head.

"The tall sparkling one you skated with all Sunday afternoon?" she asked hopefully.

"No," he answered almost regretfully. That particular young woman had spent a lot of valuable time trying to engage Mr. O'Neill's vagrant affections. And to do

him credit, Hicks had tried to help her along — she was such a really nice girl — but —

“The plump fair one we met on the street yesterday — who blushed so prettily when she saw you coming?” Bella guessed.

O’Neill laughed aloud. “You’re making up all that stuff as you go along, Bella,” he assured her. “She’s a shy little thing; she blushes at everybody.”

“Well, if it isn’t that one,” Bella began — She rubbed the furry rim of her hat against his shoulder as a sociable pussy cat might. “Who is the mysterious lady?”

He stood stock still, with the most serious look she had ever seen on his face. She, too, stopped and faced him in the snowy, pine-bordered road, the sparrows making twittering flights about them and perching on the ragged fence by the path, their feathers fluffed out till they looked like little gray balls. Afterward it all stood out in her memory like a clear, colorless etching, as scenes will, when there is something portentous on hand.

“Allaine Van Haaven,” he said in a low tone.

“Allaine Van Haaven!” Bella repeated it after him in a dismayed voice that matched her expression. They had met hardly a dozen times! How was it possible! Bella laid her hand on his sleeve. “Why, Hicks dear,” she began, “she has absolutely —”

“Nothing in common with me,” Hicks finished for her, speaking quickly as if he feared what she would say.

“And besides —” Bella went on, “you know her so little. She is beautiful but —”

He took his cousin by the shoulders, looking down at her, his brick red face a trifle pale. But he smiled with

a sort of whimsical gravity that somehow impressed Bella with his earnestness, more even than his tone.

"My dearest cousin," he explained, "it is perfectly true that I have met Miss Van Haaven exactly five times, and I admit frankly that those five times have convinced me that she is the most uncongenial girl for John O'Neill that could be found in the four corners of the earth. That she is—God bless her, and forgive me for saying so!—the most selfish—No! let us say the most unthinking woman I have ever met, the most unawakened, the most heartless, the most snobbish, the most unloving and uncaring soul it has ever been my ill fortune to meet. You see I do not mince words!—I would rather say this than have you say it, Bella. But for all this, I love her with my whole heart!" He had spoken so rapidly that Bella felt as if a swift, impetuous stream had rushed over her. Now he paused, choking a little with the intensity of his feeling.

"Hicks O'Neill!" she cried in amazement. "Are you crazy?"

"No," he returned soberly. "I'm so beastly sane in this matter, that I'm ashamed of myself. A man owes a woman a little idealization, when he's in love with her," he went on, soberly, "and love is so blind, or at least so near-sighted, that he generally manages it. But the way I'm in love with Allaine—it's like looking at a far-off moon and not being content with its lovely glow, but taking a telescope to it and scanning every ugly ridge in it—every dead, still valley—every fault that belies its distant beauty. And yet," he finished almost in a whisper, "I want that moon more than I've ever wanted anything in all my life!" He stood grimly silent a moment.

Then with a flash of a smile, "And — I'm — going — to — get it!"

Bella gazed up at him her eyes round with dismay. "Hicks, my boy," she observed in a still voice, "you are going to marry that girl to reform her."

Hicks threw back his head and laughed so heartily that the sparrows on the fence flew away in a flurry. "Perhaps I am, Bella mia," he admitted, "perhaps I am!"

They walked on slowly. O'Neill stooped from time to time and gathering up a handful of snow, molded it into a ball and shied it at various targets as they went along, with a certain conscientiousness that showed he was quite unconscious of doing it at all.

Bella was far from feeling happy over the announcement he had made to her. It seemed to open up distinctly disagreeable possibilities to all concerned. But she was silent. Hicks had, in fact, said all that could have been said; and it was the most cynical utterance he had ever given vent to in all his happy-go-lucky life, certainly in all Bella's remembrance. But that he had said it, was at least warrant that he was not falling in love in the accepted sense of the word, but deliberately walking into it with his eyes wide open. That was one comfort. But it was not a great comfort, all things considered.

Bella made only one remark as they went soberly along the road. "Does Allaine know about —"

O'Neill shook his head vigorously. "No," he answered. "Nor do I intend that she shall till everything is settled."

Bella looked doubtful. "Is it — quite fair to her?"

"It's the only fair thing, to her and to me," Hicks

replied, decidedly, and swung the Van Haaven gate open for her to enter.

As they passed up the path, Pemberton let himself gingerly down from the porch a step at a time. He wore his city clothes, high silk hat, gray trousers and patent leather boots. He made as if to go by them, but Bella detained him.

"Where are you off to?" she hailed him breezily.

"To the office," he answered briefly.

Bella laughed. "By no means," she assured him, twinkling. "You've forgotten to get the permission of your commanding officer. Come now!" She took him gently by the shoulders and turned him round. "Right about face!" And she led him, grumbling viciously, back to the front door, to be divested of his city togs by the obsequious Segby.

But the glance Pemberton cast behind him as he ascended the stairs was so mutinous, that Bella followed him to apply the soothing balm of her inimitable tact.

"Wait here till I come down," she bade O'Neill, nodding toward the library door.

So he strolled in and standing with his back to the fire that smouldered redly on the wide hearth, he was pleased — or perhaps moved, would better express it — to discover Allaine sitting in a leather chair in his immediate vicinity. But he was far from pleased at her first question, which was, in fact, her only greeting, if it might be so called.

"Where is Mr. Holbroke?" she asked with marked interest.

CHAPTER XII

Willoughby sat in his private office, scanning a sheaf of papers. This particular sheaf it was that brought the frown into his face the oftenest and the deepest. The envelope was labelled "The Kempton Block." It had been Pemberton Van Haaven's most unfortunate operation. He had been persuaded to buy a city block and to put upon it a palatial apartment house, or rather a series of apartments, finished in the most luxurious style. Thousands of dollars had gone into the mere advertising of it after its completion, and in response a few families had straggled in, to live in lonely splendor for a twelve-month. In another neighborhood the operation might have succeeded, but it was too magnificent for the purses of those who would have liked to inhabit it, and not socially well-placed for those who could have afforded to pay the enormous rents. So it declined — went from bad to worse, and now, untenanted, deteriorating with every day that passed over its aspiring roofs, it hung, a dead weight on the Van Haaven finances. It had been on the market ever since the last tenant left. But no one wanted to buy it. Possibly some day, after it had cost its present owners a small fortune, a syndicate would buy the ground, and an army of workers would dismantle the splendid apartments, tear down the carefully built walls and, razing it to the earth, would presently erect a sky-tickler — a sort of high-piled rabbit warren filled with business offices. But as yet, the price had not fallen low enough to tempt anyone.

Sometimes Willoughby dreamed at night that he had sold the "Kempton Block," and would wake himself with joy! It had indeed come to be a nightly occurrence — a dream that went by contraries the following day. The whole anxiety of his life centered around this one enormous incubus, involving over half a million. It was the only thing in which the distraught Pemberton kept a constant interest. The Kempton Block, as they had come to call it — ignoring its fanciful apartment name, the Kempton-Royale, was continually on the old man's tongue when his nephew was with him. And he maintained, through all its disastrous progress to ultimate ruin, the liveliest optimism regarding it. He was firmly convinced that it was on the eve of an upward trend — that people were just beginning to hear about it, and that they would presently clamor to live there at exorbitant rents. It would become the thing — the rage, to live at the Kempton-Royale. Soon the Van Haavens would be making an almost intolerable fortune out of it! And to hear Pemberton prattle along airily of the dividends that were almost within touch of his fingers, was to Willoughby the last straw on many an occasion, that well nigh bore him to the earth.

One morning he sat in the inner office frowning over a — to him — knotty problem. He was as far from liking business affairs as he had been when he started. He had no genius for finance. His long suit in the present crisis was sitting tight — holding on till he saw something better to do, but not going out to seek it. Pemberton, had he been himself, might soon have recouped. With all his customary conservativeness, he had an audacity that frequently had served the family fortunes.

He was not afraid to take risks. But this his nephew could not do. He sometimes felt impatiently that any dull, conscientious, hired clerk could have done as well as he.

The present problem was a certain quirk in taxes on the property, and Van Haaven sat frowning over it, wishing, meanwhile, that the Kempton Block were at the bottom of the sea. At that moment he was conscious of a stir in the outer office — a voice raised in protest. The meager, red-headed office boy sidled in, held the door shut by leaning against it and informed his master that "Some guy wants t' come in here, and wouldn't give his name!"

At this juncture the boy was pushed aside by a superior force, and Cyril entered, looking a little nettled.

This unusual apparition brought Willoughby to his feet with an exclamation of amazement. "What! You, Cyril?"

The office boy melted away with a murmur that might have been construed as apologetic or resentful according to the angle.

Cyril threw down his hat and gloves and, removing his overcoat, settled himself in Willoughby's own chair.

Willoughby drew up another chair with an air of obvious impatience. So far, his uncle Cyril had kept out of the business which, since he knew nothing of such matters, was cause for felicitation. Willoughby determined not to mince words with him.

Cyril's bulging eyes took in the label of the high-piled papers on his nephew's desk. He tapped it with the glossy long-grown nail of his little finger. "Kempton Block, eh," he observed. "Just what I wanted to talk about."

"Indeed!" Willoughby commented, drily.

"Don't get huffy, old man," his uncle advised, rebuking the tone rather than the word. "I've come to do you a favor," he went on with the lofty patronage of a naturally ungenerous man. "I can put you in the way of selling the Kempton Block — and at a good figure too."

Willoughby raised his eyebrows incredulously, not to say contemptuously. A bit of Cyril's bluff!

"To begin with," Cyril continued, in a mysterious undertone, quite as if he knew that, in the absence of the stenographer at lunch, the red-headed office boy was flattened up against the door, with his sharp ear to the key-hole — as indeed was the case — "you probably do not know that Holbroke —" He leaned forward and spoke still more softly, so that the lad missed all of the next sentence, much to his disgust.

"You don't say!" Willoughby exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes," Cyril pursued, "and the other — what do you call him? — O'Neill is, I fancy, a sort of secretary. He manages his business affairs —"

The office boy suppressed a yawn and, removing his flattened ear from the keyhole, applied his eye thereto, observant of the "guy's" bland smile. The conversation seemed hardly worth the effort it took to hear it. But since the illicit has charms, he listened again with all his might, one eye on the office clock. As soon as the hand reached the hour, the stenographer would return from lunch and he would go out and parley with the "hot dog" man at the corner. Till then —

"Beside that, he is wealthy and came here partly to look up gilt edged investments. Of course he's not much of a business man, but O'Neill —"

"What has all this to do with the Kempton Block?" Willoughby interrupted him sharply.

"Everything!" Cyril declared with a gesture of his white feminine-looking hands. "Pemberton got hold of him the other day walking round on the piazza and—well, you know how ready he is to gas about the Kempton-Royale. And, though I don't know much about business, I know a good thing when it's thrust under my nose. So I talked it up with Holbroke, and he said he'd send O'Neill in to see you about it. We'd get a dam' sight better price from an English syndicate who don't know the social line that made the Kempton-Royale a fizzle, than from anyone on this side of the water." Cyril stared compellingly at his nephew, his eyes bulging as if he sat before a bountiful meal.

"Count me out," Willoughby said, quietly.

"Come now," his uncle persisted soothingly, "listen to reason. That one deal would put us on our feet again, and some to spare—My God! Willoughby, if you knew what I've suffered with this beastly economy!" he burst out with a sort of petulant rage. "Why, I'm living on my friends—here one week and there the next—and the rest of the time at my clubs. I'm behind in dues there, too!" Through the keyhole the red-headed boy grinned appreciatively at Cyril's outraged expression, and, the stenographer returning at that moment, he sidled away to lunch, thus missing a flood of arguments and entreaties that "the guy" poured out upon his nephew.

"It's no use," Willoughby said, at last rising to his feet and looking suggestively at his chair which Cyril still occupied. "I won't have anything to do with your scheme."

"You're a fool, if you don't!" Cyril retorted.

"I'd rather be a fool than a knave," Willoughby averred in a quiet tone.

"Oh, well—" Cyril shrugged his shoulders irritably, and, rising, resumed his overcoat and drew on his gloves. He thought Willoughby most unreasonable, but determined to let him think the matter over and then tackle him again. In his inmost heart he could not imagine any man refusing such a chance to recoup.

After he had left, his nephew sat down and, leaning his elbows on the desk, went over the astonishing facts his uncle had related to him. He had wondered at Allaine's sudden change of attitude toward Olmsby society in general and her gracious demeanor toward Holbrooke; and Cyril's frequent visits to the family, his growing friendliness with the young Englishman, were perplexing. Now Willoughby knew. And the knowledge did not tend to raise either his sister or uncle in his estimation. They were out for their own interests, and too selfishly cold-hearted to know the meaning of disinterested friendship or love. He saw, too, the trend of affairs — Holbrooke was attracted to Allaine. Willoughby had seen evidences of the growing sentiment and wondered why his sister should encourage the young man. Now the matter was perfectly plain. Personally Willoughby was not impressed with Holbrooke — perhaps because he was like himself in disposition — he preferred O'Neill who continually reminded him of Bella — her magnetic ways, her overflowing friendliness — her joyous good sense. But of course he was no match for Allaine from a social point of view.

And it was this latter young man through whom Cyril expected him to put through a shady deal. Willoughby

reflected that even if he were willing, the keen frank eyes of the genial Hicks would see the flaw at once. He sighed. Yet the mere discussion of a possible sale of the family incubus had wakened, momentarily, hopes that had cheered the harassed man. Had Cyril come to him to say that Holbrooke realizing fully the depreciation of the huge property, yet wished to buy it at a low figure and make other use of it — that would have been as near a happy realization of Willoughby's nightly dreams as could be expected. Yet, suppose what Cyril had said regarding Holbrooke were so — suppose that the Kempton-Royale under the cachet of such ownership should suddenly begin to make good? Less likely things had turned the scale in real estate values. Why not in this case? Suppose he were to tell Holbrooke this — suppose instead he — were — just — to — give — the — property — a chance? Willoughby sat up straight in his chair and stared at the wall. Of course Holbrooke would buy the property at a big discount — the question was, would he buy it at all if he knew what he ought to know about it? Oh, pshaw! Willoughby turned to his desk, shaking the thought from him.

When Willoughby reached home, Segby told him his uncle Pemberton had asked to see him, and Willoughby went up at once, tired as he was.

He found the old gentleman walking up and down the room in a pleasant state of excitement. "Ha!" he exclaimed, coming toward his nephew, rubbing his wrinkled hands. "Sit down, sit down! I want to talk with you."

"If it's about business, Uncle," Willoughby warned him, "you know the doctor said —"

"Fiddlesticks!" Pemberton retorted with fine con-

tempt. "What do the doctors know, anyhow? They've forgotten how to cure people — if they ever did know!" he finished, crustily.

"Well," Willoughby inquired, "what did you want to talk about?"

The old man considered a moment, trying to turn his mind from the subject of the decline in the healing art, which always incensed him, to the matter in hand. "Yes, yes — did Cyril speak to you about —?"

Willoughby nodded.

"The Kempton-Royale," the old gentleman said, finishing his question after his nephew had answered it, after a peculiar fashion of his own.

Willoughby nodded again.

Pemberton hitched his chair nearer. "If I were myself," he declared in a shaking voice, "I would make that property yield enormously — I could get a twenty per cent. profit on it yearly." He peered into his nephew's face as if expecting the challenge that always greeted such statements from him. But Willoughby kept his face stolidly unresponsive.

After a moment the old man went on. "But since I have to leave things to you, Willoughby — you're no business man — no business man at all!" he burst out petulantly. "Since I have to leave things to you, the next best thing to do is to realize on the property. Now what's his name —" snapping his fingers impatiently, "the young Englishman — wants to buy. He wants to buy, I say!" Pemberton's eyes rolled a little, as they always did when he was excited.

"Yes, yes," Willoughby repeated soothingly. "That's all right, Uncle."

"It will be all right," announced his uncle promptly, "if you'll talk it up to—Oh, what's the man's name anyway?"

"Holbroke," Willoughby put in, anxious to spare him further brain searchings.

"Yes, Holbroke—Holbroke. That's it." He sat upright on the edge of his chair, as if about to charge at Willoughby and compel him to agree. "When he comes to see you about it, I want you to *sell—that—property!* You hear me? Don't let him get out without committing himself." The old man was trembling with eagerness and the discussion of a forbidden subject. He hammered his knee with his fist to every emphatic word.

Willoughby looked troubled. "It wouldn't be square, Uncle Pemberton," he returned. "He would lose on it just as we have lost."

"He would not!" Pemberton contradicted irately. "Did Cyril tell you—?" He glanced inquiringly at his nephew.

"Yes," Willoughby answered slowly. "But would that make any difference?"

"Difference!" Pemberton snorted. "Didn't I tell you you were no business man! Of course it would make a difference if he chose to make it known—I understand it's a secret at present. It was found out by the merest accident—"

"If you were sure—"

"Sure! Of course I'm sure," the old financier declared stoutly. "He'd make barrels of money—"

A discreet knock at the door. A maid entered bearing a little tray. "Your egg and milk, sir," she murmured.

Pemberton glared. "Damn eggs!" he commented,

briefly. "Damn milk!" he added, impartially; and yielded to the inevitable.

Willoughby saw a chance to leave. Rising he walked to the door.

"Hi!" his uncle called after him. "Remember it's not all your affair. The rest of us have some say. God knows, we've been poor long enough!"

And the echo of those words followed Willoughby into his sleep.

That night he woke from the usual dream — usual, but most unusual. A man came to his office, he dreamed, wearing a mask, and took out of his pocket two blank checks. "I am determined," he said, "to put the Kemp-ton Block deal through, in spite of all advice to the contrary. I have such a strong 'hunch' I'm going to make good on it, that I would bank every cent I possess on it."

And — still in the dream — Willoughby saw the man in the mask fill out the two checks and reach forward and blot them on a blue blotter that lay on his desk. And Willoughby took them up and inspected them as coolly as he could, with hands that trembled so that he could scarcely hold the pregnant bits of paper, and then —

He woke with the dew of the dream wet on his forehead, and the sinking at the heart that was getting to be a part of his night's sleep. He sat up in bed, staring at the two blank windows that faced him, with the country-dark thick beyond and a bare tree tapping on the pane. His anguish was so keen — his disappointment so bitter, that he wondered if he were getting just a little "off" in the head — like Uncle Pemberton.

Once more his weary brain began to grind over all that

Cyril had said. If Holbroke deliberately chose to go into the deal on the representations made to him by an old, irresponsible man and a social butterfly like Cyril, what had Willoughby to do with it? Holbroke was young and unmarried — it meant less to him and his syndicate than to the Van Haavens to lose that half million. Not that he would not point out to the young man, or to his representative, O'Neill, that the property had greatly deteriorated — he would see that himself from the look of it. But was it "up to him" as an honorable man to go further and initiate the prospective buyer into the mysteries of the social line? The line that had circumvented Uncle Pemberton in his endeavors to provide a magnificent home for the "best people" near the center of the city, close to the theaters, the shops and everything that makes a city what it is? It seemed an ultra-fine point — was it too fine to stake a fortune upon? Willoughby moved about restlessly. He was nervous — overwrought. He had lost his perspective for the moment. In that strange still hour of the night one loses one's grip on the things of everyday. One glimpses things vaguely as through a mist, distorted and out of all proportion. It is not the time to make decisions that will stand the light of day.

Yet, before the first faint tinge of gray stole through the black of the night, Willoughby, distraught with months of fatigue and with the influence of the alluring dream still upon him, had resolved to tell Holbroke's representative nothing of the facts which had made all the difference between success and failure in the Kemp-ton-Royale. For after all, was it not highly probable that when Society knew what Cyril had told him the day

before, it would flock to the apartments and insist on living there under the patronage of —

Willoughby lay down and thumped his worried head into the pillow. He told himself he had no right to use only his own judgment in the matter — not when the result meant so much to the family at large. Pemberton had willed the deal. It was settled. So be it. He fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed that the whole Kempton-Royale had fallen on his defenseless head like a house of cards, and that Holbroke was sorting them out and playing solitaire.

The next morning he woke to new discomforts. The water in his tub refused to run and, ringing for Segby, he was told that the pipes had frozen, leaving them temporarily without water. And so a little later, breakfastless and carrying his clean clothes in a suit case, he took the train and went to a hotel in town to bathe and breakfast before starting the day. He was late in reaching the office. As he worked, the discomfort of the morning remained unpleasantly with him. It emphasized the many inconveniences the whole family had had to endure away from their comfortable town house — it was a symbol of their losses. And with the thought, it became the more incumbent upon him to end the financial stringency in any way that presented itself. Yet he shrank from his resolution of the previous night, and his heart sank when the lanky office boy brought him O'Neill's name.

He busied himself with the papers in front of him for a moment, before he rose, greeted the young man and motioned him to a seat.

O'Neill looked about him with his characteristic air of cheerful interest. "Jolly offices you have here, Mr. Van Haaven," he commented.

Willoughby nodded. He was never a man of many words. Now they came harder than usual. He wished O'Neill would get down to business. He resolved to make no advances. That much, at least, he would grant to his scruples.

Presently, after a little more one-sided conversation, O'Neill drew a memorandum from his pocket-book and consulted it. "I had a talk with your uncle the other day," he began, "a very interesting talk, about some promising property that, I understand, you would consent to dispose of — the Kempton-Royale, in a word. Am I right?"

Willoughby nodded. His mind darted like light to his dream of the masked man, and he wondered idly whether, when the deal was consummated, Hicks would pay in two checks. His eye wandered to the blue blotter on his desk. Yet despite this mental roving, one part of his mind caught at O'Neill's words as a man falling off a cliff catches at the grass.

"I got the approximate figures from the old gentleman," O'Neill went on, spreading out the bit of paper on the desk, for Willoughby to see. "Are they correct?" His frosty blue eyes met Willoughby's in a frankly questioning gaze, as a child might question — "Is it good to eat?"

Willoughby glanced over the pencilled notes, then rose and, going to the safe, got the papers relating to the matter and compared them, drawing his pen through the figures on O'Neill's notes here and there and substituting

others in place of them. "Uncle Pemberton has not followed up this property for nearly a year," he explained, "and, naturally, conditions have changed."

"Of course," O'Neill said. "I just want to look the matter up first and be sure of a clear field. One can't be too careful, eh?"

Willoughby nodded without looking up. Somehow he didn't particularly wish to meet the young man's eyes then. But he steeled himself. "Of course you know," he said stiffly, "that the property has not been a success with us. Possibly in other hands—" He left the optimistic prevision hanging in the air between them.

"Yes, yes," O'Neill agreed quickly. "Your uncle told me as much. He seemed to think the apartments had not been sufficiently advertised and that now that they were better known, the property had only to be managed to be a tremendous success." O'Neill rose and reached out for his hat. "We will form a syndicate. Naturally it's a pretty big affair for one man." He smiled down at Willoughby in his whole-hearted way. "And now that I have your word that the thing's O. K., we'll talk it over, Holbroke and I, and see what can be done."

Willoughby picked up the blue blotter, turning it round and round, as if he had never seen it before. His dream of the masked man was strong upon him. "You should take the advice of more than one person in all such deals," he said in a strained voice.

"And so I did!" O'Neill returned. "I spoke to your uncle Pemberton and to Mr. Cyril Van Haaven, to make assurance doubly sure. Now I'm talking with you. Could I do more?" he asked.

"Yes!" The word burst from Willoughby with the

force of a moral explosion. "Ask any real estate man in this city what he thinks about the purchase of the Kempton Block, and he will laugh at you for a fool!"

"What!"

"It's true!" Willoughby rose and walked the length of the room before he added, "The Kempton Block as it stands is a rank failure. The social line is in the way. Society will not live in that neighborhood. Two squares the other side of the avenue, and we could fill the apartments twice over with the best people in the town. If you buy it, you lose for that reason and no other." He faced O'Neill, as pale as ashes. This time he looked straight into the frost-blue eyes.

"By Jove!" the Irishman exclaimed. "What a bally situation!" And—it might have been imagination—but there was a certain indefinable shade of—was it relief?—in his tone.

"Yes, damnable," the other echoed. He sank into his chair and, plunging his hands into his pockets, stared gloomily at the floor. He began to feel the mental anguish that followed the waking from his nightly dream. He wished O'Neill would depart. But instead, he remained a while longer talking the affair over frankly and freely from every point of view, pumping Willoughby of the last fact concerning the property. Then he rose, shook himself into his coat and bade the other farewell, shaking hands warmly and thanking him heartily for his advice, which, as he told him, settled the question for good.

After he left, Willoughby sat still a long time, his head on his breast. He felt deeply dejected, a dejection not lightened by the glow that follows a good deed. For he reasoned to himself, it was the only decent thing to do—

midnight resolutions to the contrary notwithstanding. He had begun by having a sort of good natured contempt for the little knowledge O'Neill betrayed of business affairs. But the young man had made some very astute observations in the latter part of their conversation that made Willoughby wonder just how much he knew, after all. He would have wondered still more had he heard the *sotto voce* comment Hicks made to himself as he gained the street — “He stood the test like a little man!” But Willoughby might have been less mystified had he seen the business card of one of the largest real estate firms in the city, which Hicks took from his pocket and tore into fragments, saying “These fellows served my turn. But I’m devilish glad I didn’t have to quote what they said about the Kempton Block. Poor Van Haaven! He’s feelin’ blue enough already.”

CHAPTER XIII

When Willoughby went home that night he found Uncle Pemberton waiting at the gate for him. The old gentleman shook with the cold. Heaven alone knew how long he had hung over the gate, peering down the road, for Bella was away for the afternoon and evening — one of her infrequent holidays from the case.

Willoughby's heart sank. How could he answer the question that trembled on the old man's lips!

"Is he going to buy it?" Pemberton asked, eagerly, laying his shaking hand on his nephew's arm.

"Give him time, Uncle," Willoughby returned soothingly. "Big deals aren't closed in a hurry, you know."

Pemberton searched his face anxiously. "You won't say anything to discourage him, Willoughby?"

Willoughby was silent a moment. He was glad his uncle had put the question in just that way. "No, sir," he answered. "I will not."

Pemberton sighed with satisfaction. He slid his hand into the crook of Willoughby's arm and walked up the path with him into the house. But the excitement had been too much for him, and, as he sat sipping the hot drink Willoughby ordered for him, he shook with a nervous chill and had to be put to bed.

The incident had showed his nephew how wrapped up the old man was in the scheme for the sale of the Kemp-ton Block. Whatever happened, he must not find out that it had fallen through. So, as soon as dinner was

finished, Willoughby set out down the road that led to Olmsby, to wire Cyril at his club to come and see him at the office in the morning. A phone message would have meant explanation. The telegram was non-committal. Afterward he stopped at the Rosebush Inn and asked for Mr. John O'Neill.

The young man came running downstairs smoking his post-prandial cigar, to usher his caller up into their modest little suite which was the best the Inn could boast.

Holbroke was sitting at the table writing. He rose and greeted Willoughby with outstretched hand. It seemed to the latter there was a shade more cordiality in his manner. Willoughby himself was a trifle otherwise. What Cyril had told him of Holbroke had made him feel just the least bit formal, democratic American though he was.

He sat down and plunged at once into the matter at hand.

"I suppose," he said, addressing O'Neill, "you told Mr. Holbroke about —" He paused and O'Neill filled out his sentence.

"Yes, Van Haaven," he returned, "I did — and about how rippingly you behaved in tellin' all the facts in the case."

"I came to ask a favor of you," Van Haaven went on, waving O'Neill's praise aside. He felt it undeserved. No one knew how he had been tempted — how nearly he had succumbed.

"You couldn't ask too big a one," O'Neill declared heartily.

Willoughby smiled faintly. "My uncle Pemberton, as you may have guessed, has set his heart on that deal.

He's not very well, and it's extremely important that he shan't worry about anything. I haven't told him that the deal has fallen through, and I hope —"

"We won't!" O'Neill said promptly. "We will dodge the old gentleman's questions and leave behind the most roseate impression possible."

"More than that," Holbroke put in with grave kindness, "we'll back up anything you tell him. Poor old chap, he got awfully wrought up the day he talked to me about the Kempton property."

"Very soon, we'll be moving on anyway," Hicks said, "and he'll likely forget about it. We've overstayed our time East here, because of my cousin Bella."

Willoughby murmured something polite, but, at the mention of the beloved name, a dark flush rose to his face and he had an uncomfortable impression that O'Neill's keen eyes had observed it.

After a moment more of conversation, however, Willoughby took the bull by the horns and asked boldly to see Mrs. MacFallon. She had dined with her cousin — it was what she called her day out. Hicks went for her. Presently the two came in together, hand in hand, laughing and joking like a couple of children. And Willoughby, who knew of old the touch of those firm magnetic fingers, felt a sharp twinge of something very like the sting of the green monster.

The talk turned again upon the near departure of the two visitors and, in response to Willoughby's question, Holbroke announced that they would be leaving in about two weeks. Bella added that since her patient was doing so well, she was considering the advisability — as soon as he could do without her — of making a leisurely journey

north, stopping off by the way, and arriving at Mipawan late in the spring.

Willoughby's heart sank. Was this to be the end of the dear pleasure of meeting every day the woman he loved? He had thought—and he gave notice to the thought—that Bella was tired of the North.

Bella laughed, the little crinkles coming about her eyes. "Billy don't you know that once the big, white North gets you, it never lets go its hold? One must go homing back there from even the loveliest scenes on earth." She stood musing a moment, her eyes warm with remembrance. And had Billy said what sprang into his mind, it would have been that he, too, would fain go homing into the North with her, to forget the ugly city and all that it stood for. Instead, he said nothing.

"It's a jolly place!" Hicks agreed. "I went there to visit Bella when the captain was himself—'way in the back woods. Not a soul about but Indians. And Lord! what bally old housekeeping we did." He turned to his cousin with a laugh. "Do you remember that time the coffee pot sprang a leak and we had to use the frying pan to make coffee?"

"Yes," Bella returned. "And how fishy it tasted!"

And so, for half an hour or more, the two tossed the ball of memory from one to the other and ended by making Willoughby thoroughly homesick for Mipawan and the free outdoor life that had been the gateway to health at a time that seemed as far away now as the dawn of creation. The talk brought to the surface emotions that had brooded deeply within him, ever since he had known Bella MacFallon. And so it happened that he "came out," thawed, became more animated. When

he left, taking Bella with him, Hicks remarked approvingly that "Billowy" was quite a decent chap when you got to know him.

A teasing remembrance followed Van Haaven out of an uneasy night's sleep into the light of day. As he lay blinking, hardly yet awake, it garishly revealed itself — the coming interview with Cyril. It would be difficult to explain to Cyril the reasons for his frankness with Holbroke's agent. Cyril had a nasty temper when his personal interests were invaded. Willoughby could not hope to convince him of the soundness of his action. The most he could do was to persuade him not to tell Pemberton the deal had fallen through. But he reflected grimly that if Cyril made himself too unpleasant, he would have no particular compunction about putting him bodily out of the office. With which decision he sprang out of bed and applied himself energetically to beginning the day.

Toward mid-morning the lanky boy announced a visitor.

It was not Cyril who followed close on his trail, but Mr. Sage of Belton, Sage and Company, a large real estate firm. He was a lean, dried-up man with a nervous trick of continually fidgeting of his necktie, straightening and fussing with it.

Willoughby rose to greet him, with ill-concealed surprise.

Sage gave the young man a narrow, devitalized hand to shake. "I happened to be in the building," he explained, "and just dropped in. I have never seen these offices before." He glanced about him with the furtive eye of a mouse peering from a hole.

"They're not so large as the old ones," Van Haaven returned, wondering why the man had come, "but big enough to do business in." He allowed silence to fall, hoping his remark about business might open the way to the man's purpose in coming. But there he sat for fifteen solid minutes, rambling on about nothing in particular, till Willoughby wished him in Tophet, or at least as far on his way there as the street. Sage must have felt this, for he fussed with his necktie, straightening it again and again. But he did not let his intuition hurry him away. Instead, he began to discourse upon office appointments, lighting, heat, and chatting amiably as if not noticing Van Haaven's lack of enthusiasm.

Suddenly his eye fixed itself on the wall behind Willoughby. A gleam came into it and was gone. His sentence about electric lighting broke off — resumed with a remark that didn't fit the context. He talked a few moments more.

Willoughby, though outwardly attentive, wondered what had caught the man's eye on the wall behind him and surprised him into forgetting what he had to say. He resolved to find out. Presently, with a word about the draught from a window, he rose and, passing behind Mr. Sage, glanced at the wall.

Two objects occupied the small space — a gigantic calendar, of the kind common to every office, and a photograph of the Kempton-Royale.

Van Haaven put the window down and resumed his seat.

Mr. Sage rose and, after another struggle with his necktie, reached for his hat. As he stood by the door, his hand on the knob, he remarked with a nod at the

drawing, "The Kempton Block, isn't it?" Then without waiting for a reply, he went on. "What a terrible sacrifice of capital that was for Mr. Van Haaven. I assure you, though he and I are business rivals, so to speak, we felt great sympathy for the old gentleman."

Willoughby bowed, without speaking. He thought it unlikely that the firm of Belton, Sage and Company had lost any sleep over the matter. But his business knowledge of the man before him made him watch his face keenly.

"I suppose," the other went on smoothly, "you don't get many inquiries about a possible sale—it's too big a proposition." He turned again to the door as if not expecting an answer, but Willoughby noticed that he paused a moment before he turned the knob.

Willoughby took a sudden resolution. "Why, yes," he said easily, "someone was in no later than yesterday to get a few pointers on it."

"Delighted, I'm sure!" Sage commented, smiling the too-broad smile of a man over a rival's good news. "I hope something will come of it. Good morning—good morning!" He swung the door open and was gone.

Willoughby sat down and stared thoughtfully at the empty chair. Of one thing he was sure. Sage had not come in—even in passing—without a fairly definite purpose. The visit had something, however remote, to do with the Kempton Block. Willoughby had not the slightest doubt of it. There was light ahead somewhere. The property might not be so dead as it seemed. As he pondered, the lanky boy flung open the door, and Cyril walked in.

"I got your wire," he announced abruptly, flinging his

hat and cane on one chair and sprawling into another. His bulging eyes interrogated his nephew.

Willoughby held his peace. He was turning over in his mind the answer he would give to Cyril's question. Since Sage's visit, the interview with the former had lost some of its unpleasantness.

"Well," Cyril asked impatiently, "what about the deal? Did Holbroke come?"

"No," Willoughby replied, "but O'Neill came, and we had a talk about the matter."

Cyril looked anxious. "What was the outcome?"

A smile lurked about Willoughby's mouth. "We are going to hang on to the Kempton Block for the present," he said slowly.

"The devil!" Cyril exclaimed with a scowl. "You don't mean to say you refused him!"

"No, but I'd refuse any offer he'd make to-day," Willoughby declared with quiet emphasis.

Cyril stared. Something was up—that was sure. Business matters bored him, however, and he did not inquire too closely, but contented himself with saying, "Well, of course, you think you know it all, but take my advice and don't lose a sure thing for something so far in the air that you can't see it."

A shade of amusement stole over Willoughby's face. Cyril advising anyone about business was funny. But he felt relieved that his uncle had not inquired minutely about what he had told O'Neill of the Kempton Block. "Don't say a word of this to Uncle Pemberton," he bade Cyril. "Let him understand that the deal is hanging—not settled. He banks a lot on it."

Cyril nodded absently. Already his fickle mind had

dismissed the boresome subject. "Say!" he broke out after a moment's silence, "have you noticed Allaine and him together?"

"Allaine and whom?"

"Oh, Holbroke, of course," Cyril returned impatiently. "He's out there at the house half the time—"

"Is he?" Willoughby asked.

"Well, rather," Cyril answered, picking up his gloves and flipping them across the palm of his hand. "He seems to be pretty far gone."

"Hm!" Willoughby commented. He felt all of a brother's puzzlement at the idea of a man in love with his sister. "I can't say I admire either his taste or hers."

"Oh, I say!" Cyril protested. "Allaine's a mighty good-looking girl, if she is your sister! And as for Holbroke — though I suppose that's his traveling name — incognito — he's a splendid match for her. You remember what I told you?" He dropped his voice, and his eyes bulged greedily.

"Yes," Willoughby admitted, "I suppose that sort of thing counts with the most democratic of us Americans, but personally I like O'Neill the better."

Cyril yawned and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you can bet," he affirmed, "that Allaine is sensible enough to know which side her bread's buttered on. She's out to make a good match for herself. I'll come in on it too," he added complacently. "Even the inner set here will fall all over themselves to be decent to me, once Allaine's married to Holbroke."

His nephew smiled. Cyril's climbing aspirations amused him. The pseudo young man was so far from arriving. True, he belonged to many smart clubs, but

they were all what might be called consolation clubs. Shut out from the really exclusive ones, the ranks of the climbers formed other clubs. They excluded from these the lower-downs, and basked in a moneyed atmosphere.

Their young men dreamed dreams, and their old men — there were a few of them — saw visions, visions of some day being “taken up” by “the best people.”

Willoughby conceived it all to be piffle. And he wondered in the present instance, what would be Cyril’s sensations if he told him about his wanderings with Sammy the Simp and Warty; about working for the farmer, and all the unlovely, but awakening experiences that had given him bedrock on which to build his life and his intimate conceptions of things. The temptation appealed to him, but instead of telling his youthful uncle “the story of his life,” he rose and gave Cyril to understand that the luncheon hour had arrived and passed.

A few moments later the two men parted at the corner, the one to perch on the stool of a near-by dairy lunch-room, and the other to stroll languidly on to his club and lounge in a commodious window.

CHAPTER XIV

It was Aunt Harriet who indirectly suggested a Christmas party. "In my day," she complained (forgetting, as old folks will, that the present time was also part of her day), "we would have filled this house with a real country party. Even if we had been living in the city and had to come out on purpose."

Allaine, lounging by the open fire, slipping the rings up and down on her slender fingers and watching the effect of the firelight on the stones, pricked up her ears. She had not been so much bored during the last few weeks as before. Indeed, Olmsby was quite endurable, since Holbrooke had drawn her, all unknown to himself, into Olmsby society. Of course, as she often told herself, she would drop all these Olmsby people as soon as the Van Haaven fortunes improved, and they got back to town. Meanwhile she went to dances, and teas, and "Library Improvement" entertainments and skating parties, and had a good time generally. The Van Haavens entertained little. Finances forbade, and besides, Allaine felt under no particular obligation in accepting the social attentions of the Olmsby people — it was all balanced by her mere presence at these "near-social functions," as she disdainfully termed them. But now she pricked up her ears at Miss Harriet's remark. It seemed to hold promise of something more to do.

Miss Edwina laid down a book on Art in the Stone

Age, which had bored her insufferably for an hour or more, but which, feeling Harriet's eye upon her, she had been too proud to quit. "Do you remember," she began, "the Christmas week we spent at Cousin Edward's house in Massachusetts, the winter I was seventeen?"

Miss Harriet nodded. "And I was nineteen," she added, with a certain pride in the fact of youth, even youth long past.

"We got there late in the afternoon," Edwina went on, "and trimmed the house with greens, and Charlie Ipswich and I did part of the dining-room together—we were all told off in couples—and he proposed that very evening, I remember." She sighed happily at the memory.

"Pity he was such a poor match," Miss Harriet put in, discounting Edwina's triumph.

"And we went sleighing," Miss Edwina went on, ignoring the thrust, "and came home and sat round the fire and toasted marshmallows, and told ghost stories, and had a hot supper at bedtime and —"

"And danced the Virginia reel and the quadrille—" interrupted Miss Harriet.

"And pulled candy and put it out in pans to cool and —"

"And went skating —"

"And played puss-in-the-corner out in a big field where the snow wasn't trodden down a bit, and —"

"And played games in the house — blind man's buff, and —"

"Button, button, who's got the button, and —"

"Good gracious!" Allaine drawled, "you didn't do all that in one evening, did you?"

The two ladies looked a little embarrassed. They had forgotten that their young niece was in the room.

Edwina was the first to recover herself. "Why, no," she answered sharply. "Who said we did?"

Allaine shrugged her slim shoulders, without taking the trouble to reply. But the conversation had suggested something new to her. She would have a Christmas party. So presently she trailed out of the room and, sitting down at the desk in her room, began to plan. It was characteristic of her that she took the whole thing for granted — asking no one's permission or advice, but sending off the little scented notes and making her own choice of guests.

With the exception of possibly a single evening, she did not propose to have any of the Olmsby "crowd." For behind all the social aspects of the Christmas party was a deeply considered purpose — to bring Holbroke to the point before he went west. There was, so it seemed, no surer and quicker road to intimacy than the house party. She was not unaware of the drift of Holbroke's sentiments — his eyes had told her more than once of his growing passion. But Englishmen were so pokey, so she told herself impatiently, so awfully formal about such things. Now Holbroke was the best chance Allaine had ever had — the best chance by far she was likely ever to have. She did not propose to risk it by the acid test of absence, till all was sure. She was intolerably tired of the way they had to live since the family fortunes diminished, tired of being out of her set, tired of having nothing to wear, and no particular place to go. And from all this the young Englishman was a door of escape. Allaine had only to turn the knob, swing the

door open, pass through and leave everything disagreeable behind.

It was true — perfectly true — that neither she nor Cyril knew exactly his circumstances. Only of this much they were certain — *Egbert Holbroke was a titled man*. It had been discovered in this way. Holbroke and O'Neill were walking through the town one day. The Olmsby gossip, an elderly lady with an insatiable interest in other people's affairs, happened to be walking behind them. Holbroke was reading a letter, with O'Neill looking over his shoulder. Presently Holbroke tore the sheet across and tossed it into the gutter, absent-mindedly, for the two were conversing earnestly together.

The disseminator of town news surreptitiously gathered up the fragments which grew in importance till they filled twelve baskets. For the good lady was stunned to discover that the letter began, "My dear Viscount." It gave her "quite a turn" — which she lost no appreciable time in communicating to the town at large — in discreet whispers. Olmsby buzzed like a jarred beehive.

Cyril got wind of the great news one night on the train. He followed it up and passed it on to Allaine. It was at this juncture that Olmsby society became endurable to her. From that moment she did not cease to practice her wiles on Egbert Holbroke. He became the momentous die on which her fortunes were cast. She would not yield him to any other girl. And though all the mammas and all the daughters in Olmsby did their utmost, Allaine was the only girl who had the ghost of a show with the rather indifferent Englishman.

Not that Allaine was in the least degree in love with Holbroke. She was not — so she told herself now, with

pencil poised above her list — the kind of girl to fall in love with anybody. Holbroke was no more to her personally than the tailor's dummy stuck in the show window to show off a dress suit. He was very inoffensive — she didn't "mind" him, so she said, whatever that might mean!

She shivered a little. The room was cold. She rose, went to the closet and got a wrap. Throwing it about her shoulders she sat down again before the desk. Only a faint warmth filtered up through the register. The old-fashioned frame house was a mere shell against the cold. It occurred to her that she had heard that English houses were chilly. Well, she would insist on having American steam heat or hot-water heat — whichever was the warmer. And such details as this, Allaine arranged to suit herself through a pleasing reverie that must have lasted quite an hour. For it is characteristic of the truly feminine mind that it can make wonderful visionary leaps, when a man is under consideration. While his "Happy, I'm sure!" still trembles on the air, she has already decided to have all-copper things in the kitchen and the library furnished in brown.

And frequently it does come to pass just as she planned. But in that case she never breathes a word to him — just lets him suppose the idea of wedlock with her was his own original notion. For the power of the feminine is in its reserves. It is what the woman doesn't say that keeps mere man guessing what she thinks — what she doesn't do, that drives him into a fury of conjecture. Of course this does not apply to the woman who is greater than her sex — something more than a female. Allaine had not arrived above the physical plane. She was as

coolly calculating where men were concerned, as a houri in a harem.

And so it came about that Christmas eve found the old house lighted gaily, till the snow outside the windows was stained with the illumination. Within, the pulse of holiday time beat in a jolly rhythm. All afternoon the guests had stood around on chairs and step ladders and helped to hang holly and Christmas greens on the pictures and on every available ledge of window and door.

It was undoubtedly, so Allaine told herself, a splendid setting for her particular style. She was gowned in the green velvet dress she had worn the first time she met Holbroke—and it was not only Holbroke who vividly remembered the fact. Into the fur at the neck she had fastened a sprig of holly with scarlet berries, and some of its warmth seemed to be reflected in her cheeks and her eyes. In helping her down from a ladder, once in the afternoon Holbroke held her hand for a long moment. But just as he bent over to speak to her, Hicks came into the room seeking a hammer. He glanced from one to the other with an expression that made Allaine fancy he knew he was interrupting a tête-à-tête, but instead of effacing himself, he instituted a prolonged hunt for the hammer, knocking things about and singing snatches of a Cockney comic, till he had quite spoiled the atmosphere.

When he finally did go out, Holbroke had already begun the hanging of a festoon in another room, that took a long time to adjust, so that there was no more chance for sentiment for the present. It was too provoking, Allaine thought, biting her lips.

Now there was, opening out from the library, a small room containing a few lounging chairs and a couch with

a reading lamp at its head. A door opened out into the hall, and the arch between the little nook and the library was draped with heavy crimson portières. O'Neill sat in the library, his back to the archway, shortly after his ruthless interruption of a possibly sentimental episode. Just opposite him an old-fashioned pier glass from ceiling to floor reflected the room in its cool crystal. The crimson portières stirred with a faint draught. The movement caught his eye. In a moment Allaine came into view in the little room behind him. There was something in her hand which she carried carefully to the middle of the room. She took a furtive glance around (not seeing Hicks in the high-backed chair) and standing on a footstool, she fastened what she carried into the Christmas greens that draped the chandelier. She stepped back to view the effect and, giving her handiwork a little approving pat, she went quietly out, shutting the door of the little room softly behind her.

Far was it from O'Neill to spy on a lady — or upon anybody. He had given his gaze the freedom of the glass because, being in love, it pleased him to behold Allaine. And he had reveled in her graceful poses as she moved about, reflected in the glass before his eyes. After she left, he sat musing a moment or two, then sat up straight, his fire-blue eyes snapping with the thought that had occurred to him.

What was it that she had placed in the greens beneath the chandelier? Was it perhaps, a sprig of mistletoe? Could it be possible that his ice princess would do such a thing — the cool, disdainful Allaine?

He rose, and, with a swift glance about him, like the villain in a play, he went and stood under the chandelier.

It was! Mistletoe — not too obvious to the passing glance. But plain enough if one looked for it.

A disturbing idea crossed his mind — Allaine had put the mistletoe there, not for him, but for his friend and rival, Holbroke. The sparkle died out of his eyes. It was not a pleasant thought, but he stood there chewing it over, till a counter-thought took its place, which appeared to give him immediate comfort. He smiled grimly, then turning, he walked back to the other room, where Miss Harriet and her sister had already seated themselves to await the announcement of dinner.

It was not a large party — only O'Neill, Holbroke and Mrs. MacFallon, but when the family had gathered besides, they numbered nine all told, and the house felt full and Christmassy. The dusk had come down as they busied themselves with the decorations. It was too late to do anything in particular before dinner, so they gathered round the open fire and talked.

By-and-by Holbroke sat down at the piano, which was a very good one in tolerable tune — all one dares to ask of a country piano. He slid from one thing to another, some bad, some good, with the expert juggler's exact manner of doing nothing in particular. A transcription of Liszt's, vulgar and brilliant; a bit of the slow movement from the Moonlight Sonata; a characteristic trifle of Joseffy's, that fairly reeked of tobacco smoke (he must have been smoking when he wrote it); a Chopin prelude with its chromatic minors. Then O'Neill started to sing softly a Christmas carol of Mozart's, sitting staring into the fire as if nobody were there but himself.

Presently Holbroke found the key and accompanied him. Then began a series of Christmas carols, old Eng-

lish, German and French. Holbroke hummed the bass, while O'Neill carried the air with a certain passionate sincerity that made Miss Edwina whisper approvingly that Mr. O'Neill sang "with expression."

"Of course," she said, addressing O'Neill in a pause between carols, "Of course, you and Mr. Holbroke are Episcopalians?"

To this Holbroke gave assent, but Hicks replied at length. "I was baptized Church of England when quite young," he told Miss Edwina, regretfully, "but it didn't take."

"Oh," Miss Harriet and Miss Edwina exclaimed in a breath. They were shocked.

O'Neill laughed a little at their faces in the firelight; but he was sorry to have scandalized them, and hastened to make it right. "Yes, Miss Van Haaven," he resumed, "I am an Episcopalian, not so much by birth or heredity, or baptism, as because I personally choose to be in that church, which seems to me the only sound reason for belonging to any church or creed, whether religious or political."

"Hm," Aunt Edwina remarked, quite flustered. "That seems a dangerous belief — a very dangerous belief."

"Of course," Hicks added genially, "with some additions and some eliminations."

Aunt Harriet here broke a scandalized silence by inquiring as to the said additions and eliminations.

Hicks thought a minute. "Well," he said at last, "I guess you might put it this way — I'm an Episcopalian with a Theosophic graft! But why," he asked, jumping up as if so he cast the subject from him, "why are we

talking about serious things when we ought to be frivolous?" He turned to Holbroke who still sat at the piano playing softly in an undertone, his eyes dreamily upon Allaine at the fire. "Come, Holbroke!" he said. "Give us a tango — the one you played last night."

He seized Allaine and was off with her across the floor before Holbroke had time to start the tune. They danced the whole length of the library, then O'Neill whirled her around and danced back. This time, he guided his partner through the archway, dipping low to avoid the curtain. A couple of sliding steps and he swung her directly beneath the chandelier. Then with a sudden movement, he bent and kissed her full on the lips.

She sprang away from him and stood staring, her eyes wide with surprise. In the pleasure of dancing, she had entirely forgotten the little gray-green twig with its ivory-white berries. Anyway, she had not connected it in the faintest degree with O'Neill, but with Holbroke, as Hicks had rightly conjectured.

They stood thus for half a dozen heartbeats, while Holbroke's music went purling on, and the people in the next room watched idly for them to re-appear. Then the color welled up into Allaine's face like full tide under the moon. Without a word, she turned and left him standing there, leaving by the door to the hall and running swiftly upstairs.

The young Irishman, on the contrary, grew as pale as was possible through a coat of tan that was as thick as the skin itself. He had put a deuce of a lot into that kiss! He wondered just how much of it Allaine had felt. But he walked coolly into the next room, and before anyone had time to question, he swept Holbroke



"Come, Holbrooke!" he said, "Give us a tango—the one you played last night"

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from the piano bench and, seating himself, sang Brandeis' "My Luve is Like the Red, Red Rose," with a fervent emphasis that made Holbroke eye him curiously. Allaine heard it upstairs, and the flush that had died down out of her cheeks rose again and brought with it the memory of that extremely revealing kiss. Naturally she was angry with O'Neill, but without her usual contempt. She hated a "muff," and most men were "muffs." Evidently Hicks was not one, which was a point in his favor. But he was extremely impertinent. She wondered if Holbroke— Well, O'Neill must be snubbed. That kiss —

She shook herself impatiently, put a dash of powder on her flushed cheeks and ran downstairs, arriving just as Hicks sang the last phrase of the song — "And I will come again, my luve, tho' 'twere ten thousand mile!"

Silence fell when he finished. Silence broken by Allaine's cool voice saying, in a tantalizing tone, "What a cute little song! Do sing it again."

O'Neill bit his lip. The song had been a sort of safety valve for the emotions the kiss had stirred up. He was still thrilling with the stress of the passionate words. He was minded to refuse, but he met her eyes across the piano. They were surprisingly innocent and they held a direct challenge. She as good as dared him to sing that song again — to put his naked heart into it in her very presence!

O'Neill met her eyes steadily, almost coldly. He played the prelude with its rhythmic beat that sounds like a passionate pulse, and swung once more into the song. This time he sang it even more fervently, gazing deliberately into Allaine's eyes, till the very last words. He

broke the ensuing silence by saying lightly, as if in answer to her former remark, "Yes, it *is* a cute little song. Here's another in the same style."

With that he struck up a maudlin ditty of the music halls — silly words and banal music, with a commonplace accompaniment of the tum-tum-y variety. It was as if he had said to her, "Of course, you won't know the difference." And keeping a seemingly negligent eye upon her, Hicks was pleased to observe by her expression that the shot had hit the target and rung the bell.

At this point Segby appeared in the doorway and, taking a firm hold on his upper and lower teeth by a process of energetic suction, announced that dinner was served. He had, apparently, been hovering just out of sight waiting for the end of O'Neill's ditty and, to judge from his acid expression, he was fully aware of its artistic limitations.

This, together with Allaine's discomfiture, so restored O'Neill's spirits that he gave his arm to Miss Harriet and reached the table outwardly radiant and inwardly triumphant.

They waited a few moments for Bella and Willoughby who, laboring behind the closed doors of the conservatory, had found one more last thing to do to the tree. Presently they came out, leaving the doors wide open behind them, though there was nothing to be seen in the darkness beyond the sill.

They seated themselves, with an air of mystery, and the family immediately began to question them.

"I hope," Aunt Harriet said, apprehensively, "that you'll be careful of the candles on that tree. The whole place will go up in a blaze, if it catches fire."

"Now, my dear Harriet," Pemberton protested querulously, "what do you know about—"

"If it does, Aunt Harriet," Willoughby interrupted, cheerfully, "I'll wrap you and the silver up in the table-cloth and carry you out at once." He had had a happy afternoon working side by side with the woman he loved, and the memory of it still glowed warmly. For this one day, he felt lighter-hearted than he had felt for a year and more. And no small ingredient in it, was the mysterious visit of Mr. Sage. The more he thought of it, the more likely it seemed that Kempton Block was not so deep-grained in failure as everyone, excepting Pemberton, supposed.

"Is there a tree?" Miss Edwina asked. She peered across the table. "I don't see it."

Mrs. MacFallon laughed at the tone. "You must have faith, Miss Edwina, and believe steadfastly in what you don't see, till it comes to pass."

"What is faith anyway?" Willoughby questioned.

"The total suspension of reason," ventured O'Neill, promptly.

"You're right," Willoughby concurred, more than half in earnest. "Look at what we have to swallow — Jonah and the whale and —"

"Rather a large mouthful!" the young Irishman commented lightly. "Unless one is exceptionally fond of fish."

Here Miss Edwina began to lean toward the conversation in the interval between the courses. "Fish?" she echoed inquisitively. "I like Horber's Codfish as well as any. It makes up so well into hors d'œuvres."

O'Neill nodded, waiving Miss Edwina's bridging of

the centuries from the prophet's whale to Horber's Cod-fish. "That's the kind they advertise so liberally, isn't it?" he commented. "I saw it on a fence in big red letters — 'Horber's Codfish. Makes strong people — without bones.' It sounded deucedly limp and uncomfortable, y' know."

Miss Edwina looked puzzled. But before she could reply, the door opened and Cyril entered in his usual lackadaisical manner, and, with a word of greeting all around, sat down in the chair that had waited for him from the beginning of the feast and applied himself diligently to making up lost time.

Bella, watching him, was a little disgusted. She had never seen him eat before, and she thought his particular style, though interesting, not at all edifying. He bent over his plate, his bulging eyes fastened greedily on what it contained and, as he ate, he panted like a short-winded person running.

She glanced over at Hicks, but found the latter engaged with Miss Harriet who was still disturbed about the former conversation. She was a strong — not to say a vicious churchwoman, and she did not propose to let anything pass in her presence.

"I don't approve of your views on the subject of faith. Can one have too much faith?" She impaled him upon the question as an unfeeling boy impales a butterfly on a pin.

O'Neill smiled ingenuously. "Not too much faith," he explained, "but faith in the wrong direction."

"In the wrong church?" Miss Edwina put in.

"No," the young Irishman objected, "not in churches at all, but the faith we give to principle. We have faith

in a principle, but not any in the modus of that principle. We believe in Justice, but not in the justice that hits our own interests. We believe in the fatherhood of God, but only as a fine abstract. We have not quite faith enough in any one principle to trust absolutely to it. We must bolster it up with expediencies — as if it were too weak in the knees to stand alone. And that's why the pillar of the church is so frequently such a fine supporter of the world's iniquities and injustices." O'Neill looked warmly about the table, then recovered himself with a little laugh. "Pardon — a thousand pardons!" he exclaimed. "I seem to have come to bury Cæsar with a vengeance."

"It did begin to sound like 'And fourthly, my brethren!'" Holbroke suggested drily. And Allaine laughed her clear little laugh, so musical that Hicks wondered how it could sound so exasperating.

Perhaps Bella felt Hicks' dissatisfaction, for she gave Willoughby a signal, and he touched a button beside his plate. The tree in the conservatory burst into many colored lights.

There were Ohs! and Ahs! from all around the table, and Blinkie, the Pomeranian, barked shrilly in protest, prancing about on his ridiculous little legs, till even Cyril laughed.

When the pudding came in, wreathed with holly and blue flames, the dining-room lights were extinguished and the room took on a charming flicker from the tree in the conservatory beyond. Everyone enjoyed the Christmas atmosphere. Trust grown-ups to play very heartily at the children's festival, just as they have a sneaking fondness for up-to-date toys and the circus!

The lights on the pudding went out, and then an idea

occurred to someone of the party — that they light up once more, and while the lights still burned, they would all sit silent and wish a wish, and keep on wishing that wish till the lights went out. And anyone clairvoyant enough to read the thoughts of those who sat silent watching the leaping blue flames, would have been interested to observe that of the nine people, five wished for money, and the minority of four for love.

When dinner was finished, they filed into the conservatory and stripped the tree of its gifts which were frivolous, useless and small enough not to be burdensome to the receiver.

Outside, the snow lay deep. Someone proposed a sleigh ride, but the old-fashioned sleigh in the stable proved too moth-eaten to be trustworthy. Instead, the younger contingent bundled up and went for a brisk walk — Willoughby with Bella, and Allaine between Holbroke and O'Neill.

O'Neill was curious — as any man would be — to see just how the girl he had kissed would subsequently behave. Ordinarily, he opined — for it was not by any means the first time the young Irishman had tested the matter — a girl would either be extremely haughty, for a varying length of time, or she would pepper the kisser with sarcastic remarks calculated to show him he had met a Tartar. Last, and not the least agreeable, she would be exceedingly shy (particularly, if the process of being kissed were a novelty) so much so as even to draw the gaze of more astute older folks to the fact that something had happened. But Allaine did none of the three. After the malicious remarks about O'Neill's song, she behaved exactly as if nothing had occurred. Not that

she ignored O'Neill — that would have laid too much stress on what he had done — she merely treated him so serenely, that he caught himself wondering if he had dreamed the whole thing. And when he came to consider the matter, it incensed him out of all proportion. He resolved at the next opportunity to repeat the performance, just to bring Allaine's real sentiments to the surface — for he could hardly doubt that she had some views on the subject.

He was surprised to note, as they tramped through the snow, that Allaine, who might have made him feel uncomfortably the unwanted third person, addressed him quite as often as Holbroke, even turning in the path to speak directly to him. This puzzled him, for he could not flatter himself that Allaine had the slightest liking for him — quite the reverse. In reality, had he known it, she was merely playing the old feminine game of blowing the coals — rousing Holbroke's jealousy by being nice to another man.

And indeed she succeeded. By the time they had finished their walk, Holbroke was noticeably gloomy ; and, like the average man, he did not endeavor to hide the fact, but laid his cards face-up on the table for Allaine to see.

When it was time for bed there were good-nights all around, and some betting as to who would be the first up in the morning. Holbroke whispered to Allaine begging her to take an early walk with him ; and O'Neill noticed that he held her hand a perceptible moment longer than mere friendly politeness demanded. O'Neill's handshake was short and crisp, but he looked closely at her, to see if beneath her cool, self-unconscious manner he could dis-

cern any signs of inward wrath. She was absolutely unruffled. Allaine could not have piqued O'Neill more. And she was fully aware of the fact.

Holbroke and his friend occupied the same room, a big old-fashioned one with heavy old-time furniture, that dated back to a far-off time when Harriet was a child. It felt restful. Both men smoked as they disrobed — Holbroke rather moodily. He felt himself checked.

There was a constraint between the two friends. It was O'Neill who made the first move to break it. He walked deliberately over to the old-fashioned bureau where Holbroke stood taking off his white tie and smoothing it abstractedly. "See here, old fellow," he said, and threw his arm affectionately across the other's shoulders, "are you hard hit too?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" Holbroke responded gloomily.

"She's—" O'Neill began, and stopped.

Holbroke faced him aggressively. "I warn you," he declared, "I'll fight fair, but I'll fight hard. And to the devil with friendship!" he finished abruptly.

"What bally rot!" Hicks exclaimed disgustedly. "As for me I don't throw my friendships away for any girl!" He went to the other side of the room and took off his coat and vest with a jerk, as if stripping for a bout.

Holbroke stood, watching him, frowning a little. Presently he went and laid his hand on O'Neill's shoulder. "Sorry, old man," he said, with a sort of reluctant repentance.

"Stow it!" Hicks said promptly. He knew how hard it was for Holbroke to apologize. It wasn't in the man's nature.

Holbroke's face cleared. He grasped the hand the other held out to him. Presently he said, not looking up from the buttons he was putting in his shirt for the morning — he was a methodical man — "I happened to hear a bit of conversation to-day, O'Neill, that you might like to know about."

"Well," Hicks returned, genially, sitting on the side of the bed and kicking his pumps off, "spit it out."

"The two old ladies were talking as I came down the hall, and they were so interested that they spoke loud enough for me to hear, though I wasn't keen to listen till I heard our names — that is, my name."

Hicks smiled indulgently, crossing one leg over the other and blowing a few rings by way of diversion. "And did the listener hear any good of himself?"

"That's as you choose to consider it," Holbroke returned, frowning a little. "They know about the title — I don't know how. We have certainly been super-careful. And it appears to have made the usual hit with them. We are to be cultivated assiduously, my dear fellow!" He smiled satirically.

"But I don't see — They haven't been particularly nice to me — quite the reverse," Hicks objected.

Someone walked down the hall past their door, the footsteps quite audible. It reminded them that they were liable to be overheard. O'Neill crossed the room in his stockinginged feet. "Gas away, old chap," he admonished, "but put the soft pedal on."

"The trouble is," Holbroke began — and finished in a whisper that even a person with an ear to the keyhole could not have caught.

"You don't say!" Hicks broke out, and slapped his thigh a resounding whack. "What a lark!"

"Sh!" Holbroke cautioned him. "It's not a lark I particularly relish."

They whispered together a few moments longer. Then Hicks lighted another cigarette and sat smoking dreamily, his eyes on the ceiling.

Holbroke observed him in silence a while, then he dragged a chair close. "I say," he began, in an embarrassed fashion, "isn't there a bit of mistletoe about the house somewhere?"

Hicks turned a pair of blank eyes upon him. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "what a ripping idea! Where would it be? — library, drawing-room, or the hall, do you s'pose?"

His apparent innocence disarmed Holbroke. "Mind," he went on, "I don't say there is — I only asked you, if you thought it was likely there'd be mistletoe over here in the States at Christmas."

Hicks considered a moment, nursing one pajama-ed leg over the other knee. "It's possible," he said at last, and with the word, put out the light and, jumping into bed, hid his smile in the darkness.

CHAPTER XV

Long after the pleasant stir had subsided — the stir of a houseful preparing for the night — Willoughby dawdled about in his room, unable, or rather, unwilling to sleep. It had been such a happy day that he was loath to lose the memory of it even for a few hours. The trimming of the tree had kept him close to the woman of his heart for the most of the afternoon. They made a leisurely task of it, often sitting down and chatting about things that had no possible connection with Christmas trees. Mipawan came in for its share of discussion, and Bella had a letter with her from one of the women there, beseeching her to come back, they missed her so. She sighed as she put it back into the envelope. "I'm really a bit homesick for the place," she admitted to him. "But I won't go till your uncle is quite able to get along without me."

Now he sat going over all they had said, and feeling once more the touch of her hand as he helped her off the ladder; and remembering that once she had patted his shoulder affectionately, when he said something that pleased her — about her cousin O'Neill. Such a frank caress, it was — so like Bella!

As for his own manner, he found it impossible to be as unconstrained as in the old days at Mipawan. Then he had often hurried Bella along the path that led to the top of the hill, an arm about her waist. Now it meant too much to him to be near her.

Some men take lightly to love, and they slough off one love after another as a snake sheds its skin. Willoughby was not one of these. Perhaps, because he was not of an affectionate nature, love did not come easily to him. Edna Hildreth had been a revelation to him. She had waked him mentally, but there was no spiritual substance in her. And when the affair ended, he had suffered all of a very young man's disillusion, which he proceeded to spread out all over the entire world of womankind, till Bella, wholesome and unsentimental, and above all, humorous, had taught him better.

He found himself wishing she were not quite so unsentimental where he was concerned. For nothing was more certain than that, if Bella wanted to be a sister to Willoughby, he most emphatically did not want to be a brother to her.

It was at this precise point in his meditations, he discovered his cigar was out and, looking for a match, found nothing but emptiness in the box that had contained them. This meant a trip downstairs. There were matches on the library table. So girding his bathrobe more snugly about him, he made a cautious way down the stairway, his moccasined feet making no sound.

The fire still smouldered redly in the dark room. But there were no matches to be found. He would try the dining-room. He groped his way out into the hall. A faint light came from the crack under the dining-room door. One of the servants, he supposed, was about. Very gently he pushed the door open.

What he saw made him retreat to the library. When he returned, he grasped a pistol, cocked and ready for instant action. He felt and looked grim. Yet the little

scene before him, framed in the half-open door, drew a smile from him.

The dining-room was pitch dark, but in the conservatory beyond, a faint ray of light moved mysteriously — a burglar's dark lantern. The man's back was towards him and he was investigating the gay little Christmas tree with every appearance of interest.

Willoughby stood there watching, while the restless little spark of light played over the tree from bottom to top, halting and hitching about over the tinselled ornaments. The tiny electric bulbs came for a share of attention. A gnarled paw reached out and, plucking some of the candy toys, stowed them away in convenient pockets.

The man was squat and short, but he looked powerful. The watching man in the doorway was glad of his weapon.

Willoughby was not conscious of having made a betraying sound, but the burglar suddenly wheeled — crouched — searching the darkness with cautious eyes. His firefly lamp was out on the instant. In the pitch black the two men stood on guard against each other for a long moment.

Then Willoughby with a quick movement switched on the lights in both rooms. At the same instant he said quietly. "Hands up! You're covered."

To his great surprise, he found his gun levelled at emptiness. He had heard no movement, and supposed the man to be in the same place. There was a stealthy step behind him. The air stirred, fanning the back of his neck. Willoughby ducked, just missing a wicked length of lead pipe.

He came at the intruder before he could recover himself — grabbed his wrist. At the same time he shoved the pistol right into the man's face. "Time to quit," he told him between his teeth.

The burglar backed a pace to the wall and stood there blinking in the light.

"Hands up!" his captor admonished him. Two rough and grimy paws went up reluctantly, dropping the lead pipe in the movement and dislodging a couple of candy toys from his ragged pocket, which fell to the floor with a clatter.

"All right, boss," a wheezy voice answered.

At the sound of that voice Willoughby leaned close and looked at the man.

"Warty!" he exclaimed after a second. "Warty, as I live!"

The man started visibly. He said nothing, only moistened his dry lips with his tongue. It was part of the surprises of the night, that this man should know his name.

Willoughby lowered the pistol. "Don't you know me?" he asked.

The man stared at him out of his loose-lidded eyes. He shook his head. "Naw, I don't know you. I never seen —" He paused, bringing his warty face with its myopic eyes close to Willoughby's. "Why, it's Schmitty — Johnny the Gent, ain't it?" There was the most acute surprise in his tone.

Willoughby smiled. "Sit down," he invited the man, still, however, unobtrusively keeping his hold on the pistol.

Warty sat on the edge of his chair. He shifted about, looking at everything in the room except his host.

"Well, Warty," Willoughby began, "I suppose you came in to look at the tree." He waved his hand toward the conservatory.

Warty grinned and crossed his ragged legs. "That's wot!" he returned impudently, a bit more at his ease.

"Had your dinner?" was the next question.

"Not so you could notice it," was Warty's brief response. His eye roamed to the sideboard, to a huge bowl of fruit flanked by another dish loaded down with nuts and raisins. Willoughby remembered, following that glance, what the sight would have meant to him when he and Sammy and Warty tramped the roads on the lookout for a meal. It would be part of his holiday pleasure to fill Warty as full as he would hold — always supposing there were a limit to his capacity. Of this Willoughby had had serious doubts in his former acquaintance with the "'bo." However, he would try the experiment.

"Come on," he suggested, rising, "let's hunt up a bite."

He crossed the room to the pantry, keeping Warty just ahead of him.

It was a full larder. Warty's eyes nearly escaped from their sockets with delight. They loaded themselves down with every conceivable edible and spread them out on the dining-room table. Then Warty fell to, and Willoughby settled himself to enjoy the sight.

For a few minutes Warty ate — well, not exactly in silence — but without talking. Then he stopped with a raw oyster halfway to his mouth. He listened intently. Willoughby fancied he heard a faint whistle from outside. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Warty looked confused. He had already managed

light-heartedly to forget what he came for. It was a trifle embarrassing to remember it. "I got a pal—a stall—outside," he said, wig-wagging a bulbous thumb towards the window. "He ain't wise to me gittin' th' rumble—" he finished vaguely, while Willoughby translated his statement from memory to mean that Warty had a watcher outside who was not yet aware that Warty had been discovered.

"Get him in," Willoughby suggested. And it was only when Warty slid the window open and whistled to his invisible assistant, that the host realized that while entertaining one burglar was a perfectly healthful pastime, two husky thieves might make it uncomfortable for one lone man.

However, he took a pleasantly sure grip on the gun in his bathrobe pocket and watched the newcomer cross the sill of the long low window and enter.

He was a little man, as round as an egg, with a bald head that looked as if it had been sandpapered and rubbed to a polish with wax. Out of his chubby face two mild pale eyes looked apologetically. He was the last man one would cast for the part of a burglar. Willoughby understood why he watched and let his partner burgle actively. His very rotundity was against him. One could imagine him sticking half way in and half way out of a window, kicking in an awful stew, while the watch-dog bit at his heels from without and the householder banged his poor head from within.

Willoughby went forward, his hand out. He felt very much of the host at that moment.

But the little man hung back. He seemed shy.

Now one does not ordinarily have to reassure a bur-

glar — at least such is not the popular concept. His manner was an exact counterpart of that which leads a mother to say of a backward child, "Don't notice him. He'll make friends with you in a little while."

But while he stood bashfully on one foot, Warty rose to the occasion. "This here guy," he told Willoughby with a flourish, "is muh pal. His monaker is Bonehead, from the look of his ivory. Him an' me wuz in Chicago with a mob, makin' good dough workin' th' shorts. He wuz th' stall, an' Soapy Ike, a long narrer feller as could slide hisself through a key hole, he wuz th' stone getter. We three made good dough, till Ike run up ag'in' a dick. He fell to him. He might a' slipped away, but another fly cop rapped him. We had broke away after the job, an' we wuzn't wise t' Ike bein' in th' hoose-cow. But we tabbed him that we'd sit on th' plant till he come out."

Willoughby nodded thoughtfully. He gathered that Warty and Bonehead, with Soapy Ike, had done a brisk business on the street cars, picking pockets and separating victims from the diamonds in their scarfpins, but that Ike had fallen foul of a detective and had been identified by another one and jailed; and that his two friends had passed word to him that they would let their joint money lie in its hiding place till he got out again. Meanwhile, they burgled together.

"Sit down," Willoughby invited the newcomer, and drew a chair to the table for him.

Bonehead sidled to the table and sat down, still overcome with shyness. But presently he was running Warty a close race in the game and swallowing huge quantities of the provisions Willoughby continued to place upon the board.

Meanwhile, Miss Edwina, who had a way of pottering round in the deeps of the night, had heard the dining-room window open and, peering from a window overhead, had witnessed the entry of the burglar in the light that streamed from the scene of the festivities. Also she had heard the other man's voice as they conversed. She wanted to scream, but like a woman in a nightmare, all she could compass was a series of feeble grunts. She tried to run and get help, but her legs, which had always seemed perfectly stout and able, collapsed under her.

This would never do. In a few minutes the ruffians would be upstairs to murder the family in their beds — with one notable exception, herself. She supposed they would despatch her where she was. At the thought, she dropped to the floor and began to travel shakily on all fours out of her room and down the hall, in the direction of Willoughby's room. As she lifted a limp knee to get over the door sill, she had one agonizing moment of what her friends would say if they saw her in the most undignified attitude she had ever assumed.

It was a difficult progress. Miss Edwina puffed as she shuffled along.

She had gone only a third of the distance that stretched darkly between Willoughby's room and her own, when there came to her certain sounds from below that made her desperate. The wretches were actually laughing down there!

She lost no more time trying to gain her nephew's door, but lunged against the first one she came to. It was unlocked, and she fell into the room with a yelp of terror that waked the two occupants of the four-poster and brought them up-standing to the floor.

In a second, O'Neill and Holbroke were bending over her. Both men supposed the prostrate figure to be the victim of nightmare. Hicks switched on the lights, and they beheld Miss Edwina in her pitiable plight.

"What is it?" Holbroke asked, while they raised her to her feet and carried her between them to a chair.

"Robbers!" she ejaculated huskily. "Robbers—downstairs—" and fainted dead away.

Now visitors do not, as a rule, include guns in the contents of their suitcases in spending the night with friends. The same thought occurred to both men at once. There was nothing moveable in the big room except the mahogany chairs which were cumbersome weapons, hardly liftable. However, Hicks armed himself with one of them and after a pause, Holbroke did likewise. It was comforting to realize that though it might be difficult to aim a blow with these relics of a too-solid age, no burglar, however hardy, could, as Hicks suggested sotto voce, survive a pat on the head with one of them.

They paused with one foot on the top step, to listen. Plainly there was someone down there. It might be a servant. It would be awkward to descend and explain themselves. It might look, Hicks whispered with a chuckle, as if they were running off with the furniture. They would investigate anyway.

So presently, as Willoughby and his burglarious guests feasted, the door opened inward, and two apparitions stood on the threshold, pajama-ed, and each bearing a huge chair.

The room was hazy with tobacco smoke and redolent of various viands.

Willoughby sat at the head of the table smoking so-

ciable. The two burglars leaned over their plates shoveling in the good things, as stokers shovel coal into a furnace.

At sight of Hicks and Holbroke, Van Haaven sprang up and went towards them. "Anything wrong?" he asked, not realizing for the moment that they supposed the house invaded. Willoughby himself had all but forgotten that the two tramps had made illicit entrance.

Hicks grinned and nodded towards the two ragged men. "Don't let us intrude," he murmured politely.

"Come on in," Willoughby invited them, "and see the fun."

They entered and, setting down the chairs they carried, proceeded to make themselves comfortable, eyeing the men at the table with lively curiosity.

"These are a couple of my friends," Willoughby explained easily, "come in to see me at a time they knew I wouldn't be engaged. We have been talking over old times."

"Indeed!" O'Neill commented, slightly mystified.

"We tramped it together, Warty and I, a few years ago," Willoughby went on serenely, "and I haven't seen him since."

O'Neill and Holbroke exchanged glances that meant, "There's an answer to this somewhere, if we wait long enough."

Now Miss Edwina, waking from her swoon, found herself alone. She looked about and recognized the "spare-room" brilliantly lighted, the bed disordered, and empty. In a flash it came to her — the burglars — the crawl to the guests' room to beg help. She sat up straight

and listened. From downstairs, through the open door, indefinite shreds of sound drifted up.

Miss Edwina summoned all her courage. In a moment she was hanging over the banister listening with all her ears. Something — the worst — had happened! Two growling voices spoke in a hideous antiphony. A man laughed. Miss Edwina smelled tobacco smoke. It was plain the villains had murdered Holbroke and his companion, and that they sat there gloating over the bodies of their victims. Miss Edwina shuddered. Presently they would steal upstairs and slaughter the rest of the family. At the thought, she gripped the rail with both hands and trembled her way up the hall to one room after another. Rousing all the sleepers she quavered out the dreadful news.

Pemberton, finding Willoughby's room empty, the bed undisturbed, was worried. Though he did not accept Miss Edwina's statement that burglars were below, he believed there was something amiss. Prudence forbade him to investigate alone. So with Edwina literally clinging to the skirt of his bathrobe, he went upstairs and roused Segby. Now Segby's hide was the most precious thing in the world to him. He did not propose to risk it. This he explained as intelligibly as he could, with both sets out and in a mug by his bedside, saying, with some show of truth, that he had not been hired to hunt burglars, but to attend to the dining-room end of things. He closed the door, and in an indignant silence outside, they heard him wheel the bureau and basin-stand against it.

Pemberton stormed — *sotto voce*, as not to be heard below stairs — all to no purpose. Then, having exhausted his expletives upon Segby, he made an exasper-

ated exit downstairs, with Edwina still dragging anchor behind him. The danger brought his normal self to the front. Though nervous, he kept his head.

He armed himself with a heavy walking stick, and prepared to descend to the dining-room. Miss Harriet had shut Blinkie in a closet, lest he should bark and betray them. Then she herself had gone off into muffled hysterics with her head burrowed in a pillow.

Allaine had refused to credit her aunt's scarehead. The thing was absurd. So after pushing the trembling Edwina out into the hall, she locked her door, climbed back to bed and was asleep again in five minutes.

Bella emerged from her room, wrapped warmly in a crimson kimono, and ran at once to her cousin's door. Miss Edwina had left it wide open, and the lights turned on. Bella took one look at the empty bed; then she returned to where Pemberton stood, cane in hand, and Miss Edwina beside him brandishing — but feebly, and with only the motive of encouraging her brother — a hairbrush.

"It's all right, Mr. Van Haaven!" Bella assured them, cheerfully. "Those three men of ours are downstairs hunting up something to eat. Listen!" she went on, "that was Hicks' laugh — and don't you smell coffee?"

Pemberton turned fiercely upon his sister. "There now!" he exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you it was all your imagination!"

"It was not!" she contradicted him flatly. "I saw two men go in the dining-room window."

The brother and sister glared at each other like a couple of gamecocks.

Bella feared the effect of the excitement upon the invalid. "It's quite possible," she said, "the two men were burglars, but from the sounds downstairs, our men have them to rights."

"I'm going down anyway," Pemberton champed, flourishing his stick.

"We'll both go," Bella announced.

So they descended the stairs together, while Miss Edwina, still unconvinced, hung over the banister, listening fearfully.

After a short parley at the door, they returned.

Explanations ensued, and the family resumed their slumbers.

It was well towards dawn when Willoughby crossed the lawn swinging a lantern to light the way to the barn for Warty and Bonehead.

"Now mind," he warned them as he opened the door and ushered them into the sweet-smelling interior, "no smoking here."

"No, boss," Warty replied. His voice was thick with repletion. He scrambled up to the hay loft, Bonehead following nose on heel.

The barn was draughty. Willoughby, still in pajamas and bathrobe, shivered in the breeze. He glanced up dubiously at the two tramps whose frowsy heads stuck out from the hay above. A couple of horse blankets wouldn't be amiss.

He went foraging about and presently came upon — not horse blankets, but two thick, soft, woolen lap-robies. These he handed up to the men. They were received with appreciation.

After a final look round and a good night to his guests

in the hay, he left them to the most comfortable slumbers, probably, that they had ever known.

When he came back to the house, everybody had calmed down and turned in. Willoughby proceeded to copy their example, saying to himself that he would be up early to see that the men in the barn had a good breakfast.

But it was nearly noon the following day when he woke. The sun was shining in at the windows; the wind blew the tiny crystals of snow against the panes and flipped them away in a soothing diminuendo. Willoughby lay and listened awhile. The thought of the tramps occurred to him. Poor devils! He sprang out of bed, hoping the servants had not disturbed them — though that was not very likely.

He made a speedy toilet and ran downstairs and out to the barn.

The barn door swung on its hinges, whining a song of rust.

Of the two tramps there was no sign but the dents in the hay.

As for the warm rugs, Willoughby was half vexed, half amused, to find that the rogues had taken them along as small mementoes of the occasion. A thoroughly characteristic action, as anyone who knows the fraternity will admit.

CHAPTER XVI

All that day the house buzzed with the echo of the night's excitement. Miss Harriet was confined to bed with a bad headache; Miss Edwina wandered about in a state of "nerves"; Pemberton was cantankerousness raised to the Nth power.

Allaine was vastly entertained by the conglomerate account of the invasion, and sought enlightenment from all quarters. But Cyril came down quite unconscious that anything out of the ordinary had happened, for having occupied an upper room, he had been overlooked in the stress.

They were sitting around the fire in the library. Each contributed those items of news which seemed interesting, while Cyril, considerably less lackadaisical than usual, asked questions with quite human curiosity. "What!" he asked aghast. "Did Willoughby actually have a couple of common tramps in the dining-room, feeding them off the very plates we use ourselves?" His air of shocked superiority was funny.

O'Neill laughed. "Here he comes now," he said. "Ask him."

"Ask away," Willoughby responded, drawing a chair up into the circle and spreading his palms to the blaze. "But if you're worrying about the two extra visitors of last night, stop it. They're gone."

"Gave you the slip, eh?" Holbroke commented. "Perhaps they were afraid you'd set them to work."

"Or give 'em a bath," Willoughby added with a chuckle. "It struck me with the force of half a brick they were baldy ripe for one."

The other two men laughed, and even Bella joined in unwillingly. But Allaine made a gesture of disgust. "How vulgar you are, Willoughby!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I don't know," he returned easily. "I'd rather be vulgar than some other things." He pointed the remark with brotherly frankness.

Allaine smiled provokingly. "For instance?" she suggested, raising her eyebrows disdainfully.

Willoughby considered a moment. "Well," he said at last, "I'd rather be vulgar than as coldly inhuman as you are."

"Say rather," Holbroke amended, resentful of this criticism of her, "Miss Van Haaven is too divine to fit in with your human scheme of things."

Allaine's glance turned from Holbroke's dark passionate eyes and, against her will, sought O'Neill's, almost as if inviting a compliment. They met hers with a humorous twinkle which she was surprised to note annoyed her. But he said nothing, only whistled softly the melody of a Cockney ditty.

Presently Holbroke rose as if something of moment had entered his mind. He began to wander about the room.

O'Neill's gaze followed him, and when he stopped under the chandelier and subjected the decorations to a thorough, though covert, inspection, it appeared to give O'Neill some inward amusement. In the mirror opposite, the young Irishman watched his friend saunter carelessly into the next room and go through the same proceeding. And it filled O'Neill with the liveliest satisfaction to re-

member that the little twig Holbroke sought was, by a strange, but not unnatural coincidence, reposing in the former's suitcase.

He met Holbroke's look of disappointment, when he returned, with one of entire comprehension.

Holbroke flushed darkly under it, but he drew a chair close to Allaine's and began a low-toned conversation with her, which seemed to interest her deeply, for she turned her back on the observant O'Neill and appeared to forget him.

If Hicks chafed, he gave no sign, but, crossing to the other side of the fireplace, leaned over the back of Bella's chair and listened to a three-cornered conversation between her, Willoughby and Cyril.

"To me," Cyril was saying, "good birth means everything. I don't know I'm sure, where you got your queer notions, Willoughby. I believe you'd associate with a hod carrier!" He spoke with unusual heat, and glanced toward Holbroke. He had not, to tell the truth, relished the revelations of the night before — that Willoughby should actually entertain a couple of tramps in the dining-room shocked his sense of decency, and he wanted to let their titled guest know that one member of the family of Van Haaven knew what was what. But Holbroke was deep in conversation with Allaine, and Cyril's vehemence was lost upon him.

Willoughby smiled, rather provokingly as his sister sometimes smiled. "Why, yes," he said, answering his uncle's remark. "I certainly would associate with a hod carrier if he were a good fellow."

"Good heavens!" Cyril exclaimed, under his breath. He hoped Holbroke had not heard..

"Why not?" O'Neill broke in, warmly. He began to like Allaine's brother. "That's the way I feel about all my friends. One bases friendship on something more than material possessions — titles, wealth, social position, or even, in the last analysis, mental attainments. I have known a college professor, filled up to the brim with all sorts of knowledge, to be a bally bore; while a chap who did dreadful things to the King's English, and wore positively deafening clothes, was as entertaining as he could stick — and a rippin' good sort, too! Just the mold of his mind, I suppose." He looked about him, twinkling a little to see Cyril's uneasy expression.

"In short," Bella put in, "true friendship's a good deal like old Louis Gran' Louis and his dog. You remember that old Indian, don't you, Billy?" she asked, turning to Willoughby with a smile.

He nodded.

"Old Louis was a big six-foot Ojibway, dignified and solemn," Bella went on. "He had a little black dot of a dog, a stubby, short-legged, long-necked dog that followed him wherever he stalked. When the big Indian stood still, the little dog would squat in front of him and look up in his face devoutly, as if he were saying his prayers. They were always chaffing old Louis about his dog. And one day, when there was a big crowd from the train, Dennis Hooley, pushed his way to where the Indian stood and, waiting till he had got everyone's attention, said, 'What breed is your purp, Louis?' Louis scowled round at the crowd — they were all laughing and nudging each other. Then he made a sweeping sort of motion to the four corners of the earth as if invoking an indiscriminate parentage and grunted, 'Him no dam' breed — him jus'

dog!' And stalked away, with the outrageous little beastie at his heels."

Hicks laughed. "That's just it, *Bella mia*," he commented heartily. "We choose our friends because they're 'jus' dog.' You never spoke a truer word." His hand rested affectionately on her shoulder, as he stood at ease behind her chair, but his eyes strayed to Allaine.

Allaine happened to look up at that moment, and, catching the glance, instantly put up an infinitesimal handkerchief and yawned behind it as if his regard bored her. In the recovery from this demonstration, she bestowed a smile on Holbroke that went dizzily to his head. He bent nearer to her and said something almost in a whisper that drew an answering word of protest and a flush that was almost triumphant. Things were shaping themselves finely to Allaine's plan. Already over the young nobleman's shoulder she visioned many interesting things.

"Well," Cyril declared, emphatically, answering O'Neill's remark of a moment before, "I don't choose my friends that way. Any one I associate with" (he contrived to place a wholly adequate stress on the pronoun) "must belong to my set, you know. And if there are any of the other kind in heaven, why — er — I won't associate with them!" He looked about the circle defiantly, with a special glance at Holbroke that besought approval.

O'Neill twinkled. What a bally rotter! was his thought. But he bent toward Cyril with a good-humored smile. "Did you ever happen to think," he remarked, "that, if some theologies are right, St. Peter, the fisherman, will have something to say about your getting in at all?"

Cyril shrugged his shoulder disgustedly. "I know lots

of men," he announced, " who don't believe in anything like that. I don't, myself. But — say! — there was a friend of our family — an old fellow, and he was awfully well born, you know, and all that. And he used to say — er — that all his set were — well, headed straight for hell." Cyril paused and cast an apologetic look around for mention of the word in polite society. " And all the ordinary people seemed determined — you know — to get into heaven. And this man had never even spoken — er — to a waiter except to give an order. So he — well, thought it over, and decided to stand by his set. And whenever he couldn't think of anything else bad to do, why he just went and got drunk." Cyril finished his labored tale with triumph, his puffy face kindling unwillingly. This friend of the family was a sort of hero to him — this man who sinned to keep out of a contaminated heaven.

O'Neill laughed shortly. " What an infernal old snob!" he exclaimed. " He deserved to fry."

Cyril turned his bulging eyes on the speaker. He looked outraged. This expression of opinion confirmed his previous unflattering estimate of O'Neill. However, Holbrooke came up to the mark, though languidly.

" I don't know but that I agree with the old chap," he remarked. " I've always fancied heaven, if there is such a place, must be a beastly mix-up — but then so's the other place, if what they tell us is so," he concluded sagely.

" Ye gods!" O'Neill ejaculated. " What started us on this bally old subject, anyway?"

He walked to the window and stood gazing out at the lovely white landscape. " Why do we waste this fine day

cooped up in the house?" he demanded abruptly, with the Anglo-Saxon's love of the out-of-doors. "Who speaks to wrap up and make a slide there on the lawn, where it's frozen?"

There was a general exodus in answer. And presently they were all out on the glassy streak that crossed the garden, sliding about like youngsters, slipping occasionally, and taking innumerable bumps with the good humor of people making a holiday. Even Cyril languidly joined in, when he saw that Holbroke was not above enjoying the romp.

Midway of an improvised game of hockey, O'Neill chanced to notice that Allaine, though wrapped snugly in a long fur coat, with a scarlet silk scarf about her head, wore only gray silk stockings and thin gray suède slippers to protect her feet from the chill of the ice. He had taken her the length of the slide in a precarious attempt at the fox trot, and they had returned nearly to the porch. Holbroke was at the other end of the slide trying a difficult hockey stroke.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed O'Neill, letting go her hands in surprise. "What a picturesque way to commit suicide!"

Allaine glanced down at her feet. They were very small, very slim. An expression of extreme satisfaction in that fact flitted over her face. She took a step back on the snow preparatory to another long slide.

In an instant she felt herself lifted from behind by a strong pair of arms, carried up the steps and deposited on the mat.

"Run upstairs," O'Neill's voice said determinedly,

"and get something snug on your feet." He opened the hall door as he spoke and pushed Allaine gently over the threshold.

She faced him in astonishment not unmixed with indignation. "I'll do nothing of the kind," she retorted haughtily.

They stood opposite each other a long moment, their eyes meeting in a conflict of wills. Then Holbroke ran up the porch steps and thrust himself between them. His back had been turned, and he had not witnessed O'Neill's bold coup. "Come out again, won't you, Miss Van Haaven?" he urged, feeling some unpleasantness between the two, and not exactly heartbroken at the fact.

"Yes," she returned, smilingly, and reached out her hands to him across the barrier of O'Neill's arms stretched before the door.

The young Irishman pointed to her little gray shoes. "Not in those!" he declared, speaking not to Allaine, but to Holbroke.

Holbroke's eyes followed O'Neill's finger. "My word!" he exclaimed in evident admiration. "Don't change them," he said. "Come in and sit by the fire. You must be chilled."

"Well, perhaps I am," she admitted. And O'Neill was fully aware of the sweetness in her voice as she addressed his friend. He sighed draughtily as he followed the two into the house, thrall, for the moment, to envy. Holbroke was O'Neill's standard of good looks in a man. The cold air and the exercise had brought the color into his olive skin, and his dark eyes, lighted by the feeling of the moment, made him most attractive. As for O'Neill, his brick-red face flamed and his eyes, blue as

they were, emphasized the color. He caught sight of himself in the long glass in the library and shrugged his shoulders disgustedly. He reflected ruefully that he would have to travel strictly on his merits with Allaine. And in that moment he did not blame her for liking Holbroke best. Girls thought a lot of looks — rotten state of things!

But the feeling that he was distinctly *persona non grata*, did not restrain him from sitting down in front of the fire and interrupting the proceedings that, but for him, immanently pended. In a short time Bella and Wiloughby returned, rosy and joyous. The two of them were of one mind as to the contact with nature in any and all her varying moods.

On the heels of their arrival, luncheon was announced, and all addressed themselves to it with the enthusiasm begotten of crisp air and swift movement. Afterward, Pemberton and his two sisters, who had been missing from the family circle all morning, joined the group in the library and listened to Holbroke play. O'Neill seemed restless and uneasy. He walked about the room whistling softly between his teeth, in the intervals. From distant corners of the long room, he gazed moodily at Allaine perched beside Holbroke on the music bench, indulging in what looked to be a dreamy and poetical flirtation. It was not like O'Neill to mope.

Suddenly he straightened up. A quick smile flashed over his face. His teachers of old knew that look. It meant the solution of a problem. He crossed the room and went out into the hall, closing the door deliberately behind him.

In a few minutes he opened the door and looked smil-

ingly about him. "Miss Van Haaven," he said, "your presence is earnestly desired out here a moment."

The young girl rose and walked indolently to the door. "Who wants me?" she asked.

Holbroke followed, but O'Neill waved him back without ceremony. "Only Miss Van Haaven's presence is desired," he told him, and closed the door behind them.

O'Neill hurried her down the hall and swung open the door of the drawing-room. It was cold there. There was an air of circumstance about the old-fashioned room which possibly came from not being used overly much—it did not heat very well, and the library was cosier. He carefully closed the door behind him, all without a word.

Allaine looked about the room, evidently expecting to see a caller.

Before she had time to ask a question, O'Neill reached out and possessed himself of one of her hands. He smiled down at her whimsically. "I asked you to come out here," he explained naïvely, "so that I might have a chance to propose to you. There are so many people about," he went on, "and the only other way was to do it before them, and I didn't know how you'd feel about that."

Allaine snatched her hand away indignantly. Her eyes sparkled with anger. It is probable she had never before been so roused in all her life. "You are utterly detestable!" she cried hotly.

"It was not your opinion of me that I wanted," Hicks explained gently. "It was just the answer to a question—Will you marry me?" His brick-red face paled a little in the stress.

"No!" she burst out. "No!—No!—No!" And

turning on the heel of one small slipper, she fled out of the room, banging the door shut after her.

O'Neill stood still a long moment. "So far, so good!" he murmured softly. "You're not so cool as you seem, my lady! I thought as much."

He left the room, and presently entering the library made himself the center of gaiety there for the rest of the afternoon. And though Allaine's eyes furtively searched him for some sign of discomfiture, she was unable to satisfy herself that she succeeded in finding the least trace.

CHAPTER XVII

Allaine had invited a few people for a dance that evening, and dinner was hardly over before they began to jingle up the drive in huge old-fashioned sleighs, piled warm with hay and covered with thick rugs. It had been O'Neill's idea to string Japanese lanterns around the piazza to give light for the arriving guests. And it made a charming pastel effect — the white snow stained with scarlet and yellow, shifting to shadow as the lanterns swayed in the wind.

The guests trooped in, laughing, strung taut with the drive through the brisk cold and the prospect of festivity. There was the usual mixture of human nature in the crowd — the abounding animal spirits that expressed themselves in covert mischief and open teasing; the love affairs just getting down to business, the little jealousies, and spites, that must always, so it seems, mar any occasion where people get together. All in evidence to anyone who knew where to look.

The young people grouped themselves around the fire in the library till they were thawed out, chattering like a treeful of sparrows. Then the music started up — the three or four musicians who played for the Olmsby dances. In a moment they were all whirling and high-stepping and bending and demurely pacing in the Rabbit Twist, and the Cherry Scramble, and the Aeroplane Lurch and all the other dances with their provocative

names. The great drawing-room with its shining floor was none too chilly for the exercise and the frequently vigorous steps.

O'Neill, in spite of past favors from Allaine on the dance floor, had a notably hard time to get on her card. And to keep him off it, she permitted even some of the poorest dancers in the room to scribble their initials and so commit her to their untender mercies. Not that her plan included actual dances with them — on the contrary she pleaded fatigue and sat out not a few, biting her lips with annoyance to see other girls drift by in the abandon of perfect step with someone else. One importunate youth — a notably poor dancer — insisted on the fulfillment of her promise to the letter. She fled from him in the middle of the number, with a damaged shred of chiffon floating like a bit of gossamer cloud behind her, and sank down on a couch in an alcove. A masculine shadow darkened the entrance. Allaine, her eyes on the shredded chiffon, took it to be her late partner, and called out rather petulantly, "Have you a knife?"

To her chagrin it was O'Neill's voice that answered, "Yes — are you going on the warpath after that vandal dancer?"

"No," Allaine returned innocently, "I caught my dress in something and I want to cut off the frazzle."

O'Neill suppressed a smile. He had seen her "catch her dress on something" and he knew beyond a doubt that that "something" was the awkward young man's heel. But he did not argue the matter — only opened the knife and, kneeling before her, asked, "Where shall I cut it?"

When he finished, she rose and shook down her dress, nodding her languid thanks to O'Neill for his assistance.

She had not the least intention of remaining in the neighborhood of that young man. But there he stood pleasantly barring the way.

"It seems to me," he said with conviction, smiling down on her, his white teeth gleaming in his brick-red face, "that you've tried the worst dancer of the lot. How about giving the best one a chance — me, for example," he finished guilelessly.

Her face expressed polite astonishment. She handed him her program. "Isn't your name on this?" she asked.

O'Neill did not answer her question, but busied himself jotting down his initials wherever he could find a place for them — and where there was no place, he had no scruple about scratching out another name and substituting his own for it. It seemed to Allaine when she cast her eyes over it that it contained nothing perceptible to the naked eye but "J. O'N." dashed off in a bold hand that bore heavily upon the lead pencil.

Holbroke came striding across the floor in search of her, for it was the beginning of the next dance which went by the attractive name of the Rattlesnake Glide. He swung her out, having accomplished the proper hold. She looked over his shoulder at O'Neill who was still in possession of her order of dances, putting his own in accord with it.

"You can have any of those dances that you can get, Mr. O'Neill," she assured him with a faintly malicious smile. She inwardly determined he should get none.

But as a matter of veracious record, O'Neill did get most of them. For, relying on the disposition of most people to wait until the first bars of the music begins

before hunting up the next partner, he waited unobtrusively in the near vicinity, keeping one eye on Allaine and the other on the orchestra, and swung her into the dance on the first note, possession being nine points of the law, before she could protest. Once, indeed, he poached on Holbroke's dance, and there was an unhappy five minutes between them. But the matter was adjusted amicably at last, with Allaine standing nearby, smiling carelessly as if the outcome were one of indifference to her.

Now Holbroke was a deliberate man. He never liked to begin anything unless there were more than a fighting chance of being able to carry it to a finish. This trait, exaggerated where important matters were under consideration, had postponed his proposal to Allaine a number of times. It was proof of the dignity of Holbroke's devotion to her, that he refused to accept the odds and ends of opportunity to make his plea to her. He could not bear the thought of interruption. He was desperately in love. Allaine, for her part, was fully aware of his sentiments, and, to do her justice, she saw to it that Holbroke had a number of chances to inform her of them. But as she didn't in the least understand the reason he hung back, she was a little — just a little — piqued.

And there was O'Neill — he appeared to be always on hand promptly whenever Holbroke had any sort of show. Ruthless vandal that he was, he came rambling in with all the good-natured abandon of a cheerful and affectionate dog over fresh paint or newly planted seeds. And presently Holbroke began to suspect, from a whimsical gleam in O'Neill's eye, that he was not so innocent in the matter as he seemed.

He took the young Irishman to task about it between two dances. They stood at one end of the room, leaning against the frame of a long French window, the whole bright expanse before them buzzing with conversation and laughter. "See here, Hicks," he complained, "do you think you're giving me a fair chance?"

"Yes," O'Neill returned, stooping to flick a bit of dust from his dancing pumps, and perhaps to hide a smile. "As fair a chance as I had myself."

"Ah!" Holbroke observed a trifle suspiciously. "'Had?'"

O'Neill laid his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder. "Let me give you a bit of advice, old man," he said. "If you don't find a chance — why just make one, as I did."

Holbroke paled a little. "You have proposed to her!" he said in a low tone. "Did she—?" He paused.

O'Neill laughed shortly. "No," he answered, his head up, his eyes fastened on Allaine standing surrounded by a group of men at the other end of the room, "she refused me as uncompromisingly as you yourself could wish."

A flash of joy lighted Holbroke's somber eyes. He turned to hide it from his friend. But O'Neill was fully aware of it, and he sighed as he watched his friend cross the room to the girl whom both of them loved. And he made no move, this time, to block Holbroke's chance for a few minutes with her before the next number began. It was rotten luck, he thought, that a girl could so mess up a friendship between two men. But since all was fair in love, he determined to redouble his energies. He

would do his best to prevent the other from proposing to Allaine till after they should return from their western trip. For time, he felt assured, was on his side, and he meant to get all the advantages possible from Holbroke's delay.

Willoughby stood by a window looking over Bella's shoulder at the light that streamed from it on the snow and lost itself in the shadows beyond. They had danced together — not the Harvard Crawl, nor the Blanc Mange Slump, but the old-fashioned two-step and the waltz, since Willoughby knew no other. And when he had resigned Bella to another partner and watched her graceful progress through the new steps which very lately she had caught up, he was surprised to note the difference. For where most of the other dancers scrambled and wriggled as if they were taking part in a cake walk, Bella contrived to put into all her movements the dignity of her own character — the slow grace of the minuet. And being naturally athletic, the intricate "dips" were easy to her. She danced as joyously as a child. She would have been overwhelmed with dances had she chosen to accept all the partners who offered. Willoughby was not without pride in her ability. Her success made the evening particularly agreeable to him.

Now they watched the light on the snow, and knew the intimate drawing together that comes to two congenial people in silence.

It was Bella who spoke softly at last. "It looks lovely out there, Billy — so crisp and still."

"Like Mipawan," Willoughby suggested, in a whisper, almost as if what lay beyond the pane were a fragile dream that a sound would shatter. "I wish —"

"So do I," she returned, crinkling her eyes in the little smile he loved.

He looked doubtfully from her evening slippers to her bare, dimpled shoulders.

"That could be very easily fixed," she assured him smilingly.

They dodged a precarious way amongst the dancers, and Bella disappeared upstairs.

In what seemed, even to an impatient lover, an incredibly short time, she reappeared wrapped in a fur-lined cloak, shod in carriage shoes, and feeling, she assured Willoughby merrily, like a cat in walnut shells. They slipped out, without having been observed, and gave themselves to the crystal night.

The long, lonely road stretched before them, vague and mysterious, the dark cedars bordering it on both sides, the stars coldly bright above them. The snow crackled under their feet. The air was vital about them, as if it flowed from some far off, still space amongst the planets.

For a few paces they walked abreast, but it was in the nature of an acrobatic achievement, for the path was narrow — hardly a path at all, and it sloped off at each side. Presently, Bella said, "This is too difficult. Let me go ahead, Billy."

"Why not let me go first to blaze the trail — tramp it down a little?"

She laughed up into his face. "For the simple reason, my dear Billy, that you're too big — you obstruct the view, whereas you can see over my shoulder."

"Oh, if that's the case," he agreed, and dropped behind.

Only a little further on, Bella stumbled and recovered herself with an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it?" Willoughby asked, steadying her with a hand under each elbow. He peered about to see what had startled her.

"I don't know," she answered, and stooped over something that lay directly in the path, half covered with snow. "Oh, it's a man, Billy!"

Together they brushed away the shallow drift, and disclosed in the dim starlight an old man well known in the Olmsby streets — the town loafer and ne'er-do-well. He had evidently been celebrating the coming of divinity to earth, by making as much of a beast of himself as the tavern keeper would permit. And since the latter drew the line taut only when old Venables had laid his last coin on the bar, the resemblance was as complete — barring bristles and a snout — as could be reasonably expected.

He was so numbed with the cold, that it was impossible to tell whether he were alive or dead. Willoughby turned to Bella. "Can you wait here with him a moment, while I run to the house and get help?"

"No," Bella returned promptly. "That means delay. You take his shoulders and I'll take his feet, and we'll get him in in a jiffy." She stooped as she spoke and took hold with her strong, capable hands.

Averse as Willoughby was to having her touch the old reprobate, he saw the force of her argument and, wasting no more words, lifted the man and began the journey back to the house. It seemed a long way, for the unconscious man hung limp — a dead weight between them, emaciated though he was. But at last they mounted the steps to the piazza and, opening the door, laid their burden down on a rug in the hall.

In an instant all was commotion. The dancers came flocking out and stood — an agitated and curious group — looking down at the old man, lying there, breathing stertorously, while little rivulets of melting snow ran down on the rug and invaded the shining floor.

Segby came, and he and Willoughby carried the sagging figure out to the warm kitchen, hunted up dry clothes and gave all the first aid that suggested itself. They did not dare to give him any more whiskey, but the cook made some hot lemonade and poured it down his throat when he began to be conscious enough to swallow. His expression, when its flavor was conveyed to the organs of taste, was interesting. It was indeed surprise at the unaccustomed beverage that helped to bring the old toper to consciousness.

Before the confusion had calmed down, supper was announced, and the guests came trooping into the dining-room, still discussing old Venables' mishap. Said one of them, "It would really be a mercy if the poor thing never did wake up."

"His son wouldn't grieve much!"

"Oh, I don't know about that. Young Findley Venables is fond of the old fellow."

"A nice decent workman, Findley is," someone put in, "and he doesn't drink a drop."

"They say every time old Venables gets sober, he promises his son he'll reform."

"Humph!" commented a young student of a medical college, who was steering his way to Bella's corner with a pâté and some salad. "He couldn't reform if he tried till doomsday. It's beyond his power. Every atom of him is soaked with whiskey. It's gone past the stage of

mere habit — it's a 'disease.' " The young doctor laid the plate on Mrs. MacFallon's lap and, having helped himself from a passing tray, sat down beside her, prepared to thrash the matter out with her. He was fond of argument, and very sure of himself.

He launched out on a flood of statistics, to which Bella listened with an interested twinkle. She had met his kind before. When the stream of figures and facts began to diminish, and a smile of complacency widened their source, she said,

"I'd like to tell you a little story out of my own personal experience — if it wouldn't bore you too much?" She flashed a friendly smile at him.

"Do!" he invited her, adding as an afterthought, "Perhaps I could explain it to you on a sound physiological basis."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I wish you would."

"Well?" he suggested, inquiringly.

"Well," Bella echoed, narratively, "Gober Morgan was the drunkard of a little town I used to know. He had been drunk practically all his life. One day I was leaving town for a while. As I stood waiting for a car, old Gober came reeling down the street. I wasn't afraid of him — he was such a weak, cowardly toper that he was harmless. But I watched with disgust as he came toward me. When he got within a few feet, he began to leer at me, lost his balance and lurched into the gutter. There he lay in the wet and dirt. I took the car and left with a feeling of relief.

"One year later I stood on that same corner when old Gober came along. But this time I had to look twice to be sure it really was Gober Morgan. He wore a neat

business suit and a decent hat. And he was sober — the first time I had ever seen him so. I tell you I stared!

"This is the way it had come about. A preacher had evangelized the town some months before, and the people who came into the saloons where old Gober cleaned spittoons for drinks, talked about the things the preacher said. Gober's curiosity was roused. He sneaked into the meeting one night and sat there stupidly listening and hardly understanding a word that was said. And someone who knew the old man, told him to come the next night, and promised him a drink if he did.

"So the old drunkard shuffled in, drawn by the prospect of an easily earned glass. But something the preacher said, waked the sodden soul of him, and he 'got converted.' When he came out of the meeting, the man who had promised him the drink came up and slapped him on the shoulder. 'Come get your drink!' he cried. But Gober pushed past him and ran up the street, as if the devil were after him. And the men who knew him laughed and jeered at him. It was probably the first glass he had ever refused — and no one knew what it cost him. Someone said afterward that he sobbed aloud as he ran.

"In the morning he went to see the preacher and told him he wanted to join a church so he could keep straight. He didn't care what church — just so it was a church. Then the preacher did a wise thing. He got a job for Gober at the church he was to join — cleaning and tending furnace. And after he had been sober awhile — a sort of probation — he joined the church as a member. And three hundred men of the town joined with him! For they said, 'If old Gober can keep straight, we can!'

"The first time he was paid, he was so overwhelmed that he could hardly hold the five dollar bill the church people put into his hand. He went home to his boarding house and up to his room without a word. The woman had been told to watch him to see that he didn't bring liquor into the house. So after he'd been up there a long while, the stillness made her uneasy and she looked through the key hole.

"There sat old Gober Morgan with the five dollar bill in his hands — just holding it and looking at it. By-and-by he raised it to his lips and kissed it. And the woman couldn't look any more."

Mrs. MacFallon paused. Her blue-brown eyes were crystal bright, her face luminous with the feeling that comes to us when we get a glimpse into the verities.

The young doctor drew his chair closer and began to argue the matter with the limitless sense of knowledge and the boundless confidence of the new-fledged college man. The thing was impossible, he told Mrs. MacFallon. She had made a mistake in the man. He had not really been a drunkard, but a neurasthenic who had imagined his sprees. "Never tell me, my dear Mrs. MacFallon," he finished, pleasantly, "that degenerate cells can be restored by hymn singing."

Bella smiled placidly at him and welcomed Willoughby to a seat beside her, as he came through the crowd seeking her, a well-filled plate balanced on each hand. She recognized that the young doctor was a "saturated solution" and could not assimilate any more ideas, but precipitated any additions to the bottom of his mind, and called the matter finished — or rather "settled" as indeed it was.

Already the roomful had forgotten all about the late

unhappy cause of the discussion — the old drunkard lying on a couch in the kitchen. They chattered and laughed as they ate. Presently they drifted out of the room and started dancing again.

But, finally, when the night waned to the dawn, they were gone. The last jingling sleigh slid down the drive and into the road, a lantern swinging beneath it to show the way. Before the echo of the jolly good nights had died away, Segby extinguished the Japanese lanterns. He put as much disapproval into the simple act as he could muster. His mind clung with a death grip to what he knew or surmised of the conventionalities. He had never heard of Japanese lanterns being used when snow was on the ground. He knew them as adjuncts of the midsummer fête — the garden party — the June regatta. It never occurred to him that they looked pretty and served the useful end of guiding the guests to and from the piazza. But if it had, that would have made no difference in his views. He was of the not uncommon type who labels a suave mild day in January, as "Most unseasonable," and disapproves, almost as a matter of conscience, of a drop in the temperature in mid-July — a person whose "It is not customary!" has all the shocked force of an eleventh commandment. Enough of Segby!

The young people sat on the stairs in the hall talking the evening over. To Willoughby it had been the most satisfactory affair he could remember for some time past. Bella, too, had enjoyed it as much as she ever enjoyed indoor romps. But Allaine was in the sulks. It was a horrid evening, she reflected moodily, nursing a satin-clad knee, on a step considerably above the others. But pride kept her smiling and saying what a good time she

had had. Perhaps she overdid the matter. O'Neill, watching keenly, rather fancied so, and he instantly decided that the evening had been a pronounced success — from his own personal standpoint. Holbroke was frankly triste, and stood silent by the balustrade.

Presently O'Neill sprang up. "Come," he said, "let's have a look at old Venables before we turn in." He led the way with Bella and Willoughby, while Holbroke followed with the lackadaisical Allaine.

The old man lay on his back on a thick rug before the fire. He was asleep, and his face had the dignity that sometimes comes in slumber when the smaller self and its concerns are put off and the soul surrenders to the infinite.

Bella looked closely at the old man; then bending, felt his pulse, but so gently that he was not disturbed. She turned to Willoughby. "Did you get word to his son?" she asked.

Willoughby nodded. "Not at first hand," he returned; "they couldn't find him at his house, but I left a message to tell him where his father was, and that he was safe."

"Poor old chap!" O'Neill ejaculated.

The remark was not an unnatural one, but for some reason, it was the last straw to Allaine's ill humor.

"Poor old chap!" she echoed contemptuously. "Poor old beast, you mean. I have no patience with people who snuffle over the lower classes!" She gave the old man's body a disdainful little tap with the point of her slipper as if she spurned his common clay. She turned with a little half shrug as if to leave the room.

But like a flash, O'Neill was in front of her. He took her by her slim bare shoulders and shook her gently.

"Damn that cold hard streak in you, my dear," he said, softly between his teeth. There was a curious passion in his tone.

Allaine stared up at him for an instant without speaking. The angry color ebbed from her cheeks. Into her jewel-bright eyes came a strange hurt look. Then she turned, said good night in a lifeless tone to them all, and went slowly out of the room.

Holbroke started forward at O'Neill's unconventional address. He went white, as a reverent person will at sight of sacrilege done. He stopped only long enough to threaten O'Neill with his eyes, then dashed out into the hall after Allaine.

But she had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVIII

The next noon saw the end of the Christmas visit. The three guests jogged comfortably to Olmsby in Miss Harriet's snug little carriage. The small Van Haaven car was out of commission, and would probably remain in the garage till the family fortunes improved. This was altogether Willoughby's idea. The rest of the family had absolutely no notion of economy, and, in the first days of Willoughby's administration of the estate, he had been appalled at the mounting bills and the extraordinary items considered necessary by the members of the family. For the first time, the young man had felt his power. And he used it inexorably. Cyril's two cars, of which one or the other was always in the repair shop, were disposed of, as well as the one Willoughby shared with the family. Remained then, only Miss Edwina's little run-about, which was warranted sound and kind, particularly the former. Miss Harriet had been allowed to keep her two fat, sleek horses and her closed carriage, the only alleviation to her of the dullness of Olmsby.

It was the second time that day that the carriage had traversed the frosty white road to the village. Early in the morning the son of the derelict Venables had tramped out to bring his father home. Willoughby, without consulting any one in the house, had ordered the carriage out and sent them both to Olmsby, warm and comfortable, with Miss Harriet's special heating apparatus going at full tilt. Later, when Miss Harriet dis-

covered this fact, she was highly indignant, and she and Miss Edwina discussed the matter at length. To them it was only one more instance of Willoughby's middle-class ideas. They spent a busy morning and part of the afternoon trying to decide where Willoughby had acquired the taint that showed itself in these unpleasant ways. Up and down the family tree they raged, conversationally speaking. But singularly enough, neither lady mentioned the grocer whose accumulations they had so cheerfully and lavishly spent for a generation or two.

After all, the thought of the grocer pained them. Why should they not forget him? Life was surely gray and inglorious enough at the present moment without adding discomfort to it. So they condemned their nephew unsparingly, while Blinkie, feeling that something stirring was on foot, sat on Miss Harriet's lap and barked shrilly at Miss Edwina; varying this program by sitting on Miss Edwina's lap and barking shrilly at Miss Harriet.

They were sitting close to the fire in the library — the only really comfortable place in the house. Presently Allaine strolled in. She held an open letter in her hand, and she was frowning prodigiously.

"Can't you keep that little pest quiet?" was her first contribution to the conversation.

Miss Edwina tapped Blinkie with the handle of her lorgnette. "Be still!" she adjured him. For answer he turned impetuously in her lap and kissed the end of her nose — a liberty he was never, under any circumstances, allowed to take. He speedily found himself brushed off as though he were an intrusive fly, scratching desperately for a detaining foothold all the way down the steep satin hill of her lap, and yelping bitterly. But in

a moment he scrambled up into Miss Harriet's lap, which, being cloth, was even more comfortable. There, he snuggled down and achieved peace for himself and everyone else.

Allaine stood leaning against the mantel. "Evelyn Copley is home from abroad," she said, discontentedly. "She has asked me to a tea."

Miss Edwina looked up interestedly. "Of course you're going," she averred.

Allaine shook her head.

"Why not?" Miss Edwina demanded.

"In the first place I haven't a thing to wear. In the second, we haven't a decent car."

Miss Harriet leaned toward the speaker. "But my dear," she urged, "you can use my little brougham. The horses were clipped the other day. They look very smart indeed."

Allaine laughed disdainfully. "Smart!" she echoed. "No doubt it was a smart rig—in the Stone Age! I wouldn't go to my own funeral in it."

"My dear!" Miss Harriet exclaimed quite scandalized. "I wish you would try to remember that you are talking about my carriage and pair!"

Allaine looked down into the fire and stifled a yawn. Old people, she reflected, were so stupid. It wasn't the least use to explain things to them. So she made no reply.

Miss Edwina's eyes took on a malicious gleam. She had never dared to say anything so very uncomplimentary about her sister's equipage, but she had thought unpleasant things about it. Poor Harriet was so behind the times! Miss Edwina was glad that dear Allaine had one

aunt who understood her point of view. She smiled graciously at the girl drooping by the fire. "Harriet's rig is quite out of the question," she agreed. "Fortunately you have a choice. If Willoughby will get my little runabout fixed, you can have it and welcome. It's small, of course — just the sort of car for a lady — not one of these big, awkward, high power machines, that look so unfeminine."

"Good Heavens!" the girl ejaculated with languid contempt. "You'll be offering me a wheelbarrow next!" With that she walked out of the room, leaving the two ladies gazing after her in helpless disapproval. And now it was Miss Harriet's turn to smile covertly at the other's chagrin.

Holbroke and O'Neill departed for the West the afternoon of that same day, connecting with the evening train for Chicago. They had left the city far behind and the train swung along rocking with speed. Holbroke sat by the window in the Pullman, looking moodily out into the darkness, relieved by an occasional light. O'Neill, too, had fallen into a reverie. But it seemed to be a pleasant one, for once or twice he smiled. Holbroke's clear-cut profile attracted his eye. He studied it interestedly. He wondered at its somber expression. He happened to know that Holbroke, that very morning, had boldly manœuvred for his chance with Allaine. They had been alone in the little room off the library for quite a while after breakfast. O'Neill had watched them as they came out. He was, however, quite unable to conjecture what had happened. Allaine looked serene, though a trifle more serious than usual. Holbroke's dark face was touched with color at the cheek bones and his thin lips

pressed tight as if in agitation. So might both have looked after a passionate episode — whether it had resulted in an engagement or not. O'Neill felt his heart contract with the pain of uncertainty. Holbroke's question — Allaine's answer — meant much to him.

So now, as the train spun along in the dark, he mused on the matter. And presently, drawn by his gaze, Holbroke fidgeted a little, then turned and looked at him. "Well?" he asked.

"Did she?" O'Neill said, in the same tone.

"Accept me?" Holbroke finished. "Well, she didn't refuse me. But she will give me no answer till we come back." He looked moodily out of the window again, drumming with his fingers on the narrow sill. It was bitter for him to confess to his friend that he had not been able to get Allaine to commit herself to a definite engagement. He was far from realizing that Allaine felt sure enough of him not to drop like an overripe apple into his lap. It was part of her campaign to keep him a trifle unsure of her. This was her second thought.

The man by his side made no comment. But Holbroke felt O'Neill's shoulders heave against his own in a deep sigh whose sound was lost in the rattle of the train.

Meanwhile, a few hundred miles back in Olmsby, Bella was making preparations for leaving the town. Pemberton no longer needed her ministrations. He had improved greatly. She had already paid a number of social P. P. C.'s for she had made many friends. Her room at the Inn was heaped with the contents of the closets en route to the trunk. She went to and fro, humming one of O'Neill's songs. Already the town seemed lonely without him. She missed his frank affection, his almost

boyish confidences. They had grown up together, a constant association, interrupted only by Bella's marriage. She smiled to remember how fiercely jealous he had been — for he had chosen that particular time to add a sentimental value to their friendship. He had been quite convinced that he was in love with Bella, and it was some time before he outgrew the notion. Since then, Hicks had been in love and out of love with hosts of girls, who ran a varied gamut of feminine attractiveness. Bella had chided him once for fickleness. But Hicks had gravely explained that he was seeking a particular girl, and when he found her he would love her to the last day of his life, and after. He glimpsed her — so he said — in many girls, and when he discovered that it was only a glimpse, he took up the search again elsewhere. Disillusion had come to him again and again. But Bella had never known him to be disillusioned from the very beginning, as in the case of Allaine — to walk deliberately into a love affair with his eyes wide open to a girl's inmost defects. This fact alone led Bella to attach an unusual significance to it. As she reflected, her eyes grew troubled. She knew, as only another woman could know, the depths of selfish coldness that made Allaine Van Haaven the very last girl, seemingly, for O'Neill. And in spite of the fact that everything was in Holbrooke's favor in the present aspect of affairs, Bella had a strong intuition that her cousin would not lose without a bitter struggle. Hicks, she reflected with a sigh, set his heart so passionately on things.

She rose with the thought, and, moved with compassion for his future sorrow, she wrote him a cheerful little note and directed it to his hotel at Chicago, their first

stop. Then donning the rowdy felt hat and a warm coat, she ran downstairs and out to the postoffice with the note. On her return, she met a member of the altar guild of St. Sebastian, a chatty person who expressed the extremest concern over Bella's departure. "The fair is to be next week, Mrs. MacFallon," she told Bella plaintively, "and you promised us you would make some of your lovely crullers for it!"

Mrs. MacFallon was sorry, but she explained that she had made all her plans for departure. Then, having declined, with the utmost difficulty, luncheon with the chatty lady on the following day, before her train left, Bella made her way to the Inn to finish packing.

She found Willoughby waiting in the exchange for her.

He looked careworn. When Bella remarked on his appearance, he admitted that he was harassed about a business matter. She felt it would relieve him to talk it over. So she drew him out, and he told her some special worries regarding the Kempton Block. Yet he felt that if he could only hold the property a little longer, they need not sacrifice it as they must at this juncture. It was a problem to him—he might not be doing the right thing. And Pemberton had lately become even more insistent as his health returned. He wanted to rehabilitate the big apartment block and to spend money in advertising it. He was convinced the time was ripe and that they would succeed in filling it with the élite of the city. And if, as Willoughby feared, the block had to be sacrificed—his face expressed his apprehensions for the old gentleman.

"It would certainly not do Mr. Van Haaven any good," Bella observed.

"I have had a tentative offer for the property," Willoughby went on, "far below its value, from a real estate firm which could afford to hold it for a rise. But I won't accept unless I can do no better. In any case," he mused, "I do not trust that particular firm and I would have to be very sure, to close any bargain with them."

"Who are they?" Bella asked, more to draw him out than because of any real curiosity.

"Belton, Sage and Company," he answered.

Bella nodded thoughtfully.

Then Willoughby, fearing to bore her with his talk of business, turned the conversation into another channel. He spoke of her departure on the following day, and though he forced himself to speak of it lightly, Bella saw that it was an effort. He jotted down in his memorandum book the places where she would stop en route and the dates of her arrivals and departures on her leisurely way north. And Bella detected a touch of real envy in his tone as he spoke of Mipawan in its future spring glory of melting ice and budding trees.

When he rose to leave, he held her hand clasped for a long moment, looking down into her face with a curious wistfulness that brought the moisture into her own eyes. But all he said was "Good-by,"—almost in a whisper, as if he could not trust his voice. Then he was gone, and Bella, mounting the stairs to her room, found herself suddenly full of regret, triste, and a trifle more lonely than she had felt, even in bidding O'Neill good-by.

At bedtime, the packing was still uncompleted, and she moved restlessly about the room, doing little odds and ends of sewing that in nowise pressed to be done, reading a few pages of a book as she put it away, and, in short,

dawdling over the task of filling the trunk, in a fashion that was not characteristic of Bella MacFallon. Finally she decided to finish in the morning, and, with a feeling of relief, she left the things heaped on the chairs and the trunk half empty, and set about the business of getting to bed.

In the morning she began briskly. Soon she was folding the last few pieces. Thank goodness, she thought, the process of leaving would soon be completed. Always, she felt the same regret, though not in a like degree, in saying farewell to any place — she had felt it strongly when she left Mipawan. She closed the trunk with a snap and, sitting on it, began to draw the straps tight.

From where she sat, she could see a portion of the main street, and almost at the end she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Eglin's trim little house, where she was to lunch before her train left, and of the mansion next to it, where the old Quaker couple, Mr. and Mrs. Landis, lived their long delayed honeymoon together. Bella smiled as she thought of them, then sighed. What wonderful things ideals were, that those two old folks should patiently abide a whole lifetime apart, and then come, young in heart, into the kingdom of which they had dreamed so long!

Her hands dropped idly into her lap. The wide old-fashioned street faded from before her eyes, and she saw instead —

She sat silent a long, long time.

She sprang from her seat on the trunk, with a sudden change of manner. She tugged at the straps, opened the trunk and began hastily to take from it all she had packed into it, replacing the things in the closets and bureau

drawers. And now, she was all energy, with no trace of the indecision that had weighed on her the previous night.

Once she stopped and shook her finger at herself in the glass. "My dear," she said reprovingly, "this is not like you!"

The phone rang, and the clerk told her the man was ready to take her trunk to the station.

"Never mind," Bella returned, happily; "I'm not going."

Toward noon she dressed and went down the street to Mrs. Eglin's house, and afterward spent a half hour with Mrs. Landis. They were delighted to know she was not to leave them till later. But she made no explanation of her change of plans to them — nor, as a matter of strict fact, to herself.

That evening she called up the Van Haaven house, and presently heard Willoughby's voice. It sounded to her like the voice of an old man, weary and disenchanted.

But the moment he heard her bubbling laugh, he was all animation. "*You? You?*" was all he could say.

He only half understood her explanation — he thought she said something about crullers — he was not sure. "May I come to see you to-night?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes," she said, and with another word or two, hung up and was gone.

A little later they sat in the bright little "exchange" with its red carpet and red and green wall paper, and the usual furnishings that always suggest the auction room. People passing and repassing, a trio of card players, a young lady who played snatches of many things on the upright piano that stood, as if at bay, with its back to

the wall—all these were distracting to the two who wanted to talk.

Presently Willoughby bent toward Bella. "Let us go for a walk. This room is as populous as Fifth Avenue!"

Bella nodded agreement. When she came downstairs later, dressed for the street, and drawing on her gloves, she found Willoughby standing by the door. He gave her a look of such happiness that she asked him if anything particular had occurred.

He waited till they descended the steps into the dark street, then turned to her with a look which Bella characterized to herself as a "faithful look." "Do you need to ask?" he said, his voice a little unsteady with feeling.

"Oh," she returned lightly, "is that all!"

"All!" he echoed. "I wish I had the right to tell you just what it means to me not to lose you."

Bella was silent. She debated with herself whether she was really being square with Billy. Merely to save herself the pain of refusing him she had—

"You'll be glad to know," Van Haaven began, his manner stiff with the repression he was exercising on himself, "that Belton, Sage and Company have come to better terms in the matter of the Kempston Block. I hope to sell the property next week, after we have gone over things more thoroughly."

"Good!" Bella commented. But her voice sounded abstracted.

Willoughby went on talking of their probable plans, should the deal go through. He was fighting hard for self-control. Business seemed the best antidote to the overpowering desire to take the woman he loved into his arms. And this last was the one thing he must not do.

By Bella's righteous code, she was as much bound to the man whose name she bore, as if he stood sane at her side. Willoughby knew that if he were to retain her friendship he must concur in her view. So he talked business, business, and more business, feeling like a fighter sparring for wind.

And of what he said, Bella heard hardly one word in ten. After all, she told herself, was it not quite her own affair — to give or withhold? Would anyone else in her place —

"And so the family will go to town," Van Haaven was saying, "and begin to live again. And I for one—" The strain in his tone — his repressed manner — decided Bella.

"Billy," she said, breathlessly, laying her hand on his arm, "I — I — must tell you. He — is — dead."

Willoughby said not a word. But he turned his face away from Bella, as if, even in the dark, she might guess the joy in it. Bella understood, and it was to the credit of her faithful nature that, notwithstanding the deep waters she had breasted for Captain MacFallon's sake, the little congeniality there had been between them, she felt a pang of resentment at Willoughby's attitude at word of his passing.

"When?" Van Haaven asked, his face still averted.

"A year ago," she answered him, her voice cool with the thought that was in her mind.

Willoughby was silent. There seemed, from his standpoint, to be nothing to say. He could not condole with Bella. Captain MacFallon's death was a blessed release both to her and to the poor man whose mind had jangled against all possibility of returning. And for him-

self — He sighed — a deep sigh that came from the bottom of his heart.

Bella walked thoughtfully beside him, her head bent, her eyes on the ground. She was grateful to Billy for not saying anything. Her momentary resentment passed as quickly as it came. After all she could forgive him much for his love — for his self-control in keeping it to himself. She reflected upon his growth since the time he first told her he cared for her. Then he had been a mere boy, his love unproven. Bella had thought it a fancy that would yield to the next girl he met. Of late, she knew it for what it was — the one enduring passion of a strong, silent, undemonstrative man. And her own attitude toward that love was no longer the good-humored, half tender tolerance of a woman to whom love is no new thing. She felt herself, to her great surprise, leaning on his love, resting in it, taking it for the first time as seriously as he proffered it.

They walked on to the edge of the town. In their very silence there was a drawing together in that intimacy that transcends speech.

A jingle of bells and the wink of a lighted cigar from a passing sleigh.

They stood aside to let it go by.

It left a pungent whiff of tobacco smoke and a faint echo of frosty music behind it.

Silence again. Before them the lonely road dipped between bare white fields and lost itself in the vague horizon. Far off, a ghostly glimmer showed itself and was gone, as if a fire flickered somewhere below the line where the sky met the earth.

The two who watched turned to each other with a

smile, that neither saw in the dark of the road. The same thought was in both minds — How dazzling bright the Aurora must be shining in far-off Mipawan at that very moment!

Unconsciously they drew closer.

The man felt the vital thrill that always came at Bella's touch — the mere brush of her sleeve against his arm. And for the first time, Bella felt it, too.

He leaned down toward the white blur of her face in the dark. A subtle awareness passed between them. His lips touched the cool round of her cheek — sought and found her mouth.

Love had come into its own.

CHAPTER XIX

For the second time in his life, Willoughby disturbed the serenity of the family. After keeping the blessed secret to himself for a few days, he announced his engagement. He ignored both Cyril and Allaine in the matter, knowing their probable attitude. From the others he expected sympathetic concurrence. In that he was disappointed. The two aunts "took it hard!" Pemberton received it in his usual abstracted way, making no comment. All the waning powers of his mind seemed centered on one thing.

Willoughby had to listen to a long antiphonal harangue from the two ladies, in which the social position of the Van Haavens, past, present and to come, bore a large part. They considered that Willoughby was cheapening the whole family in his alliance with a mere nobody. Who was this Mrs. MacFallon, anyway? The widow of the captain of a lake-steamer — a woman of no social connections! —

But at this point their nephew showed a side of his disposition they had never before seen nor suspected and which left them both in tears. They had never seen him angry before. It made a profound impression on them. He forbade them to mention Mrs. MacFallon to him, unless they could speak of her as she deserved. As for his engagement, Bella had honored the whole family by accepting him. That must be the end of their silly criticism. He would hear no more of it!

He was white and shaking when he left the room. In

all his life he had never been so stirred. And like most reserved people, he had a contempt for himself for getting beyond his own control, even in this instance. He felt that the woman of his heart had been brought into a brawl — a family fracas, in which the blows were harsh words hotly spoken. Incidentally it took him all the rest of the day to quiet down. It was like an illness, he said to himself impatiently.

Bella noticed its effects that evening, and though he told her nothing, she had her own shrewd suspicion as to the cause. After he left, she sat a long time thinking deeply, then dashed off a letter to O'Neill.

As soon as it was known that Mrs. MacFallon was lengthening her visit to Olmsby, the ladies of the altar guild of St. Sebastian's waited on her and besought her aid. One of the features of the mid-winter fair at the parish house, was a cafeteria, where everything was cooked "as you wait." It was part of their plan to have a cruller corner — which seemed to be not at all like a corner in crullers. Bella had once made some of these dainties for a library tea in Olmsby, and their fame had spread.

Old institutions disappear. New ones take their places. But when the church fair took its place in the scheme of things, it came to stay. And the reason is this. It is founded on the rock of eternal human nature. One might almost call it a religious expression of the business sense — a pious direction of the pulse of profit and loss. For there is a large number of people who will not give a dime to the Lord without being reasonably sure of getting back a pincushion or a tie holder in return. And for such there is provided the perennial church fair.

It was toward the end of the fair. Miss Edwina stepped out on the curb at the parish house and helped Harriet to alight from the despised carriage. It seemed the proper thing to patronize the fair. The bishop was to be there this particular day, hence their choice of it, too. Where a bishop could condescend, a Van Haaven might follow. They proceeded majestically up the path, past the church door and into the parish house, pleasantly conscious of the stir of their arrival.

Inside, there was a not unpleasing confusion of odors. Two young matrons dressed as German Frauen, dispensed frankfurters and sourkraut on tiny wooden plates. There was a Chinese booth where chop suey and luke-warm tea abounded — a French booth, an Italian and a Dutch booth. Finally there was a New England kitchen. The Misses Van Haaven tasted of all that offered. They were never averse to refreshment. The daughter of the village carpenter, dressed as an Italian, served them with spaghetti and green peppers in a smuggy and savory conglomerate; a dressmaker — overwhelmed at the honor! — poured tea with a shaky hand into two Chinese cups for them; while the sister of the plumber, who had fixed the frozen pipes at Helmhurst the previous week, waited on the two ladies with rye bread and Dutch cheese. So far, so good.

"Good Heavens!" Miss Edwina exclaimed suddenly, staring at something at the other side of the room.

Miss Harriet's eyes followed her gaze.

In a booth fitted up as the interior of an old-fashioned kitchen, several women in Colonial garb busied themselves making appropriate things to eat. One was the angular wife of the village undertaker; another, the ticket

seller at the railroad station. The third was — Mrs. MacFallon! *And she was frying doughnuts — frying them in public, for anyone to taste!*

Miss Harriet's black eyebrows curved upward with surprise and indignation, till they nearly touched the part in her iron-gray hair. Miss Edwina began to feel faint with emotion. This was the woman whom Willoughby had engaged himself to marry — the woman who would presently bear the august name of Van Haaven — *making crullers — in public!*

The two ladies turned to each other and whispered sibilantly together.

It was somebody's duty to interfere. They would tell Willoughby later. He would surely show her how such things were regarded amongst the élite. Meanwhile, she must be rebuked. Edwina, who was still feeling a trifle faint, begged her sister to go first, and she would follow and back up the protest.

So Miss Harriet rose majestically and sailed across the room, while the dressmaker studied the cut of her skirt, and the undertaker's wife mentally measured her for an expensive, rosewood coffin. She was panting a little when she arrived — what with outraged feelings, determination and the untoward mixture she had consumed at the booths.

Mrs. MacFallon was bending over the redhot kettle, a skimmer — if that's the name of it — in her hand. Beside her, on a tiny table, a platter was piled high with golden-brown crullers. They exhaled an enticing odor. Miss Harriet's nose twitched in spite of herself. But she spoke stiffly and uncompromisingly.

“Mrs. MacFallon, I want a few words with you.”

Bella turned with a smile. The fire had flushed her cheeks till they were like the heart of a damask rose. Her blue-brown eyes were luminous and kindly, and her round white throat rose exquisitely from the colonial kerchief. For the first time in their acquaintance, it came grudgingly to the older woman, that Mrs. MacFallon was handsome. She drew close to her and spoke in a tone that, though low, was none the less severe.

"I understand," she said austerey, "that you are going to marry my nephew."

Bella took a peep into the sizzling pot. "Oh, did Billy tell you?" she asked, cheerfully, ignoring Miss Harriet's expression.

"I hope you realize," Miss Harriet went on portentously, "that ours is no ordinary family."

"Yes?" Bella said, inquiringly, and she contrived to throw into the monosyllable a certain sympathy, as if Miss Harriet had mentioned a hereditary infirmity, fits or buncions, for example.

"Yes!" Miss Harriet echoed the word with decision and a downward inflection. "No ordinary family."

At this point came an interruption in the shape of a little boy whose mother had sent for a dozen crullers. Bella excused herself while she counted them out, put them into a paper bag, received the price and clinked it into a pasteboard box.

The sight enraged Miss Harriet. "The Van Haavens," she observed acidly, her gaze on the boy shuffling away, "have never mingled with the rabble."

Bella opened her eyes wide, but she said nothing. She noticed that Miss Harriet was trembling, and pushed a chair forward for her.

The old lady refused. She felt more dominant standing. "Since you intend coming into the family," she went on, puckering her lips over the words as if they tasted bitter to her, "we must really insist on your giving up undignified work like this, for instance." She waved a haughty hand at the cruller pot. "It is most objectionable," she added. "It must be stopped."

"And what," Bella asked interestedly, "were you thinking of doing about it?" There was not the slightest resentment in the tone — only a dispassionate curiosity, and the faintest glimmer of a twinkle in her eyes.

Miss Harriet gaped. There is no other word for it. Before she could reply, a voice came from behind them.

The bishop stood there smiling.

"My dear Mrs. MacFallon," he chirped, "I want a bagful of those lovely crullers to take home."

Miss Harriet turned and greeted him. He thought her manner a little stiff, and wondered at it. She was generally so supergracious with him. So by way of breaking whatever ice was between them, he begged her to share a plateful of his favorite delicacy with him. "We can sit right down here," he said gaily, "and consume them at our leisure — hot from the very crucible!"

Now crullers were the last thing on earth Miss Harriet desired at that precise moment. But such is the coercion of the conventionalities, that she sat down with an air of disapproving expectancy, and awaited the worst.

Bella twinkling with the humor in the situation, whisked some crullers out and put them, crisp and brown, on two plates. The bishop received his with an expression of gladness — his guest for the moment, with an ungrateful and acid glare. With the bishop's eye on her, she could

do no less than nibble politely. But she found it extremely difficult to swallow.

Miss Edwina, from afar, watched these untoward developments with an uneasy sense that things were not turning out as she had expected. What could Harriet be thinking of! She pulled herself together and crossed the room.

The bishop rose and insisted on her taking his seat. Then, before she could protest, he begged Mrs. MacFallon for yet another plateful for Miss Edwina.

And presently, she, too, sat munching one of "the odious things," and exchanging acrid glances with her sister.

The bishop was puzzled. He chatted amiably, striving to raise the temperature of the social atmosphere. "Mrs. MacFallon and I," he said, turning to Miss Harriet, "have discovered we have mutual friends here and there in the world." He began to count on his fingers. "There's the —"

"Have a hot one!" Bella broke in urgently, sliding a couple on his plate.

The bishop nodded affably. "The — er — the —" he reiterated, seeking to recapture the thread of conversation. But while he sought, Mrs. MacFallon bent over him, a sugar shaker in hand.

"A sprinkle of sugar, bishop?" she asked. And in the effort to decide the momentous issue, he clean forgot what he had been going to say. For which one member of the party, at least, was grateful.

In a few minutes the Misses Van Haaven rose to go.

The bishop, who was nothing if not liberal, begged them to accept a bag of crullers to take home to "my old

friend, Pemberton." So perforce, the two ladies, already feeling that they had more in that line than either they desired or deserved, waited resignedly while Mrs. MacFallon delivered "the odious things" wrapped in a paper bag. The man of God carried them to the Van Haaven carriage and handed the bag to Miss Edwina after she was safely seated.

As they drove off, Miss Edwina wept a few angry tears. After they were clear of the town, she dropped the crullers out of the carriage window. Miss Harriet expressed her approval of the deed in an unflattering remark or two that covered, not only Mrs. MacFallon and her crullers, but also the bishop and his ill-timed generosity. It was the first time in her life Miss Harriet had ever spoken harshly of a bishop.

As for Mrs. MacFallon, she had her hands too full, the rest of the afternoon and evening, to meditate much on her first encounter with the in-law attitude. But when she got home to the Inn late that night, it recurred to her as a definite situation to be faced with as much tact and firmness as she possessed. She sighed as she looked at the ring Willoughby had slipped upon her finger, a blue-white diamond in an old-fashioned setting.

It was not till she was ready to put out the light that Bella discovered a telegram lying on her dressing table. It was from a western town and it read mysteriously:

"Your letter received. Just a little longer, please.
"Hicks."

Already it had puzzled the telegraph operator at the station. She had read and re-read it. Did it mean longer letters? — or was it a necktie? She was knitting one for

her gentleman friend. He liked them long, too. He had a thick neck. Oh, well!— She tossed the message on her desk, and hoped Mrs. MacFallon would understand it anyway.

Mrs. MacFallon read it through only once, then thoughtfully tore it across and threw it into the waste basket. She looked a trifle disappointed. A different answer would have lightened the in-law situation. But in less than ten minutes she was fast asleep and had forgotten everything.

Each of the Van Haavens took the news of Willoughby's engagement to Mrs. MacFallon characteristically. Cyril looked incredulous; whistled in evident amazement, and declared that Willoughby had always been a muff, and it was a wonder he hadn't married the housemaid. Then, finding that Harriet's and Edwina's bitter remarks on the situation bored him, he shrugged his shoulders and vanished to the city, to more congenial topics and people.

Allaine, for her part, disdained to comment on her brother's choice of a wife. But her cool eyes went hard — as steely as a sword blade. And that very day, she started to "get even" with Willoughby in a peculiarly feminine way. She went into the city, hunted up a high-priced modiste, and ordered a gown for Evelyn Copley's tea. Then jumping into her taxi, which had been kept waiting during a lengthy interview with the modiste, she went to an exclusive milliner's shop, and chose the most gorgeous hat she could find there. She told herself with some satisfaction, that she had economized long enough. She was tired of living in a rathole, and dressing in rags. Willoughby was just what Cyril had said — an unspeak-

able muff, or he would have made the Kempton-Royale pay long before this. Now she was going to have what she wanted, and he could pay the bills, and she really didn't care how he managed it either. The end of the afternoon found her deliciously fatigued, and very much pleased with her shopping.

At home she found a letter awaiting her. It was in a strange handwriting. She piqued her curiosity for a few moments by turning it over and trying to guess from whom it came. Finally, she rent the envelope in a jagged line with one finger, in the brutal way women have with letters, and extracted the double sheet it contained.

It was from O'Neill. It sounded exactly like his conversation — nothing formal about it. It described in short pithy sentences his adventures — and Holbroke's — since they had left Olmsby. Allaine read it to the end, then began again and read it in little bits, here and there, wherever a word caught her eye. It was, she thought, just such a letter as one man might write to another. And for some mysterious reason, it did not please her. There was not one word that even distantly approached sentiment — not even when O'Neill mentioned the exceedingly pretty girls he had seen in the town where they were staying. He wrote, not as a lover might write to give the beloved one a possible pang of jealousy, but most casually, as one discussing the price of butter and eggs. Allaine's lips curled in a little unpleasant smile as she put the letter into its mangled envelope, and tossed it on the table. She reflected that she had always thought men of that effusive kind were fickle. She did not trouble to answer the letter, though one from Holbroke, received the following day, was honored with a tiny note. While

she said nothing in particular, the tone of the note was friendly and mentioned his return to Olmsby as a relief from the dreadful dullness of the stupid little place.

Home relations continued painfully strained between Willoughby and his family. They had not considered it necessary to call upon Mrs. MacFallon to show any social recognition of the engagement. Quite forgotten already was her kindness to them at the time that Pemberton was so in need of her friendly services. The invalid was no longer capricious or unmanageable. Instead, he seemed to brood silently over business matters, particularly his one hobby. He continually made plans regarding it, and went over them with Willoughby. Futile plans they were, in which Holbroke bore a prominent part. The next night he would have an entirely new plan. It seemed a harmless diversion and a pleasing change from his old irascibility and obstinacy. He came and went like a ghost in the house.

Allaine made a virtue of necessity and went to town in the train, the day of Evelyn Copley's tea. But she had phoned for a limousine to meet her at the station, and she stepped out of it under the striped awning at Evelyn's door with a feeling as near complacency as anything she had experienced for a year and more. This was one of the smartest affairs of the season. Everyone worth knowing would be there — and no one else. Allaine reflected, as she ascended the steps, that though the social list of the Van Haavens had literally gone to the dogs since her aunts had dropped out of active participation, she could easily build it up, once she made a brilliant match, as was her intention.

Her entry, even in that crowded place, was obviously

triumphant. She was exquisitely dressed. She had never looked handsomer, and her manner had just the tinge of veiled insolence that some people consider the hallmark of smartness. Many turned to look at her.

She took her way deliberately through the rooms, surprised to find how few she really knew. Her own particular set moved in a different orbit from these. There was always a foreign contingent, a sprinkling of official Washington society, a diplomat or so, at the Copley affairs. Evelyn had hosts of friends, for she had been out a good many seasons and had spent some of them abroad, which always gives one foreign connections. There she stood, in an animated group, with a background of flowers, and a display of lace-trimmed bouquets that would have turned a "deb's" little head! A foreign-looking man, rather elderly (Allaine remembered his picture in a Sunday supplement, and tried to think of what country he was the ambassador) stood beside Evelyn. He had partly turned away and was deep in conversation with someone whose hat rim showed just over his shoulder. Allaine determined to wait around for a possible introduction.

Evelyn Copley was cordiality itself. She had heard, since the issuance of her invitation, of the financial misfortune of the Van Haavens, and she knew what it must mean to a young girl just on the threshold of the social world. It made her more gracious than ever before to Allaine. Judging others by herself, Allaine fancied it was the dress that made the difference.

Still holding the girl's hand in her own, Evelyn glanced about as if looking for someone. "There's a dear friend of mine who is staying in your little town. I want you

to meet her. There she is, talking with the Ambassador — I knew her, and so did he — before she and Captain MacFallon went to Canada."

It might be too much to say that Allaine's jaw dropped. Perhaps it would be better to say that she looked and felt as if she had swallowed a door knob. Evelyn's words induced a sinking feeling. Even the most exclusive people, it would seem, made mistakes. But of course there were always pushers — climbers. Her lip curled a trifle.

"Oh — Mrs. MacFallon," she said slowly, "I've met her."

Evelyn, her eyes on the back of the ambassadorial neck, noticed nothing amiss in either the words or the expression. But Bella, hearing her name, turned and looked full into Allaine's face. She came forward, her hand out, and greeted the girl in a friendly fashion. Allaine noticed that she had come in an ordinary black tailormade suit. She was probably the most plainly dressed woman in the room.

"You wouldn't believe," Evelyn observed to Allaine, laying her hand affectionately on Bella's arm, "what trouble I had to get this elusive lady to come to my tea."

"Now please don't put me in such an unsociable light!" Mrs. MacFallon begged, laughing. "You know I wanted to come."

"Is your brother here?" Evelyn asked Allaine. Then without waiting for an answer, she turned to Bella. "You know Willoughby of course?"

A faint tinge of amusement flashed into Bella's turquoise eyes. She nodded assent. She felt the color filter slowly up into her cheeks.

Allaine bit her lips.

Evelyn Copley glanced from one to the other. She wondered —

A new group of guests shifted through the moving kaleidoscope of the crowd to the receiving party. Miss Copley turned to greet them. Not for months afterward did the query finish itself in her mind. And then —

Left to themselves, the two faced the embarrassment of the moment by recourse to the safest and kindest of topics — the weather. Then some friends spied Mrs. MacFallon and, surrounding her, bore her away to another part of the room before she had a chance to introduce Allaine or even say good-by.

Allaine watched her disappear in the crowd. For some reason she felt, in spite of her lovely clothes, at a disadvantage. In the last few minutes she had been made to swallow several unwelcome facts, and they were still heavily undigested. Perhaps the one that forced itself most distinctly upon her consciousness, was that a woman whom she despised had been taken up by a social set to which she herself aspired. Even the fact that she herself owed her invitation to the previous acquaintance of Evelyn's mother with a former generation of Van Haavens was unpleasant to consider. Aunt Harriet, Uncle Pemberton and, to a less degree, Edwina and Cyril had counted these people — the Copleys and their friends — amongst their near acquaintances. But since Mrs. Copley's death a few years before, and the growing disinclination of the elder Van Haavens to go out much, Allaine had come into a vastly diminished circle, and that not composed of the "best people." She had chosen the merely wealthy to whom birth was a negligible quantity, good manners highly unnecessary and brains a distinct disadvantage.

Now she was beginning to doubt her own judgment. Her "dearest friends" had deserted her when they saw signs of a diminishing purse. Allaine was not perfectly sure in her own mind, whether she wanted them back.

She wandered disconsolately about in the crush. Finally she drifted into the dining-room. The first one she saw was her uncle Cyril. He sat in a comfortable corner, gorging — there was no other name for it! His greedy face was full of satisfaction.

Allaine pushed her way to him. "Do get me something, Cyril," she said, "I'm famished."

He got up in a grudging sort of way and, intercepting a passing waiter, captured a well-filled plate and gave it to Allaine. "Dandy eats!" he commented huskily. "I'm going for some coffee. Keep my seat till I come back."

"Bring me some, too, Cyril!" she said. He nodded over his shoulder and disappeared. But, though Allaine waited patiently for what seemed a long time, he did not reappear. It was a way he had, when he wished to escape anything irksome. He had often played the same trick on her. Allaine was well used to it, and they had had many a tiff over it. After a while she rose and made her way out of the house, stepped into her limousine and was whirled away.

At dinner that evening she was distinctly petulant. To her aunts' questions about the Copley tea, she gave short and unsatisfactory answers. Miss Harriet presently spared herself the trouble of any more inquiries. But Miss Edwina, made of sterner stuff, persisted.

"You must remember, my dear," said Miss Edwina a trifle severely, "that the Copleys are old friends of our

family. Harriet and I knew Richard Copley long before he was married to Nancy Ellicot. They were the very cream of society — not the ordinary kind of people that you and Cyril take up with." She sniffed her disdain.

"Oh Lord!" ejaculated Allaine under her breath. Then aloud, with exaggerated patience, "Well, what do you want to know?"

"Was anyone there that we know — any of the Regent Street people? — the Tabers, the Plymptons, the Van Dusens, the Bredels?" Miss Edwina asked.

Allaine shook her head. "I didn't stay very long," she admitted, yawning. "I might have missed them."

"Didn't you see *anybody* you knew?" Miss Edwina pursued unctuously. "Evelyn has such a select circle."

Allaine considered. "Well — I saw Cyril." A spark of malice came into her cool eyes. "And — Mrs. MacFallon," she added, glancing from one to the other to observe the effect.

"What!" they both cried at once. "Mrs. MacFallon! Who brought her?"

"I don't know," the girl returned. "She was talking to that good-looking ambassador whose picture was in the papers last Sunday — you know the one I mean. Perhaps —" she added naïvely, "perhaps he brought her — I don't know." Allaine suppressed a smile. They looked so shocked.

"The Spanish ambassador?" Edwina exclaimed aghast. "Impossible!"

"He must have mistaken her for someone else," Miss Harriet put in agitatedly, giving vent to the only rational explanation that occurred to her at the moment.

Allaine smiled languidly. She had undertaken this re-

countal, not with any idea of raising Mrs. MacFallon in the eyes of the two aunts, but merely to pass on to them the disagreeable impression that had spoiled the afternoon for her. She was really in quite a bad humor. This was one way of wreaking it on them.

Before they had a chance to ask another question, she rose and excused herself from the table. "I'm too tired to talk," she murmured, and vanished to her own room for the rest of the evening.

The Misses Van Haaven resigned themselves to the inevitable. Allaine had roused their curiosity to the top pitch, and then left them painfully suspended like the Prophet's coffin, between the earth of facts and the sky of fancies.

CHAPTER XX

Among the friends Mrs. MacFallon met at the Copley tea were a Mr. and Mrs. Moriss. It had been years since they had met, and they sat together in a quiet corner piecing out their knowledge of each other. The Morrises were shocked to hear of Captain MacFallon's misfortunes and recent demise, though privately they had never thought the two well-mated. On Bella's part, noticing that the old people were in mourning, she made tactful and sympathetic inquiry and learned that they had lost, within the year, their only daughter, Margaret.

Bella was profoundly sorry for them. They had idolized their daughter and she had loved them too dearly to marry and leave them.

Mr. Moriss explained that he had just *made* Mother come to the tea, thinking it might cheer her to meet some of her own friends. They were going abroad in a short time and would not have the chance soon again. But before they left, they hoped to arrange the preliminaries for a memorial for the daughter.

"I want — we both want," Mr. Moriss began, "to endow a home for young girls. Not at all on the ordinary lines. Mother thinks — and so do I — that the usual affair is too big, too clumsy, too impersonal, to do the most good. The unit is lost in it. The staff is too occupied to get into close touch with the girls. There's too much clockwork and not enough love in it."

Bella nodded thoughtfully. "I have the same feeling about hospitals," she commented.

The old gentleman hitched his chair nearer. "Now this is my — this is our idea. A big building — the bigger the better — but —" he tapped the palm of one hand with the fingertips of the other, giving emphasis to each word, "divided off into a number of separate establishments, each large enough to accommodate half a dozen girls at most, and each presided over by a house-mother who will treat these girls as if they were her own daughters."

"And we want," the old lady put in, wistfully, "to get mothers who have had dear daughters and — and lost them. That will make them so much more sympathetic." She looked appealingly at Mrs. MacFallon, her faded blue eyes dim with feeling.

Bella leaned toward her and laid a hand on the thin ones crossed on Mrs. Moriss's lap. "I think it's a beautiful plan, dear!" she said softly. "And Margaret would have loved it!"

The old gentleman having hitched his chair as near as was humanly possible, hitched himself toward the edge of it, till he looked like an extremely fat frog sprawled on the edge of a toadstool. "I have been —" he went on eagerly, "that is we have been — looking around for ground near the center of the city — but of course at as reasonable a figure as possible. These girls are to be working girls, and they will need to be near their work. A real estate firm has been on the lookout for what I want, but they are very slow about it —" He rubbed the top of his head in a worried way till the sparse hairs stood on end — "And very mysterious, too!" he added, in an undertone, as if speaking to himself.

"We wanted to make a beginning before we went

abroad," Mrs. Moriss said. "But we leave in a few days, and nothing is done." She looked her disappointment.

"That is too bad!" Bella began. "It should not be so difficult to find a —"

"Dear Mrs. MacFallon!" a voice broke in behind her, "I'm so sorry to interrupt. But Evelyn begs you will come and meet some very special friends. She was afraid you had already gone."

Bella rose and, bidding the Morisses a warm adieu, followed Evelyn's envoy. She would have liked to hear more about the Moriss plan. She was very fond of the two dear old people.

It was after eight when Bella arrived at the Inn which, for the moment, was home to her. She found Willoughby waiting for her in the little private parlor that was part of O'Neill's suite. He sprang to his feet when she appeared in the doorway and, crossing the room, closed the door after her.

"Have you waited long, Billy?" she asked.

"Not very," he responded. "That is, it didn't seem long—I had such pleasant thoughts." He drew her towards him as he spoke and kissed her very lightly—almost shyly. Then with his hands still resting on her shoulder, he said gravely, "You know, Bella, I've always considered the love words in songs and stories to be a part of the English language that didn't belong to Billy Van Haaven by any manner of means. And now, by the simple and gracious process of letting me love you, you have given me all those charming words for my very own. And all the while I was waiting for you to-night

I said a lot of them over. I never dreamed I knew so many!" he finished naïvely.

Bella gave his arm a little pat. "Frivolous creature!" she exclaimed. "Couldn't you have spent your time more profitably?"

"I could," he confessed, "if you had been here."

Bella looked at him, her head cocked on the side, like a wise and observant bird. "My dear Billy," she said teasingly, "for an undemonstrative man, you are coming on. If you had been rehearsing this in your mind as you waited, you couldn't have done better."

To her surprise he flushed. "I did rehearse it — part of it —" he confessed ruefully. "We are such cold-blooded people — we Van Haavens! Demonstration of any sort comes hard to us. I have thought you must think me such a stupid fellow — such a cool, matter-of-fact lover, but I'm trying hard to be different."

"Don't!" she advised him, gently. "Be yourself, Billy. And don't run away with the idea that I like unlimited spooning. Far from it."

He looked relieved. "But people in love —" he began.

"I'm not in love with you, Billy," she interrupted him, briskly. "I love you — which means a great deal more."

"Does it?" he asked doubtfully. "I can't tell the difference. Have patience with the stone image, won't you?" He drew her to a seat on the tête-à-tête beside him.

"Well," she explained, "of course this is only my own idea about it. But it seems to me that being 'in love' is a sort of mirage of the real thing. Nothing but a lovely reflection of something real below the horizon, and upside

down at that! It's a delightful sort of craziness — yes, I know all about it, Billy! I've been in love as many times as I've fingers." She spread out her taper hands on her lap and gazed thoughtfully at them.

"Well?" Willoughby questioned curiously. She rarely talked of herself. In a way of her own, she was as reserved as he.

"I began to fall in love when I was six years old," she continued. "But I found out that being 'in love' was the most ephemeral emotion in the world. It's a mixture of hero-worship and physical attraction."

"And loving?" he asked, thirstily. If the woman of his heart loved him he wanted to know the exact meaning of the phrase.

She broke into a smile of the sweetest. "Loving, Billy dear, is a matter of character. For instance —"

"For instance," he repeated softly.

"I love the real you — your sincerity, your pluck, your high ideals, your quiet ways — your —" She stopped and thought a moment, then turned to him with a whimsical smile. "There are lots more, Billy, but I disremember them."

"More!" he echoed in astonishment. "I didn't know I had any of those. You're making them up as you go along!"

"Indeed I'm not!" she contradicted him, warmly. "Let me go on — there's your peculiar sense of humor —"

"Is it peculiar?" he asked. "And how?"

"By not being there at all, sometimes, Billy dear," Bella said, mischievously.

She laughed till her blue-brown eyes closed to a line of dark lashes.

He looked just the least bit hurt. "But that's not a reason for loving anyone," he told her. "Let's leave that out."

"By no means," she returned, decidedly. "Don't you know that it's quite restful to find refuge from people who are just tingling with repartee — jokes — puns — what not! It's like getting away from very musical people, who talk opera and 'Vogner,' and having a day off with people who can't turn a tune — and who wouldn't if they could." She twinkled at him with such affection that the sting of the frank comment was allayed.

"I often wonder," he said and stopped —

Bella looked at him as if she were reading his mind. She expected the question. "About Captain MacFalon?" she asked softly.

Willoughby nodded. "I wouldn't ask you — pry into your life," he assured her earnestly, "but if you ever happen to feel communicative —"

She twisted his ring round and round on her finger. "My dear Billy," she said, "I want to tell you all about him and about everything — how I came to be in Canada, and all. But not till my cousin comes back."

It seemed a strange connection — till O'Neill came home! Willoughby was puzzled. What had O'Neill to do with anything Bella had to tell him?

More to change the subject and show her that he did not intend to question her further, he plunged into the business affair they had discussed the previous night. Two phases of the proposed disposal of the city property perplexed him — one was how he should explain to Pemberton the necessity for getting rid of the encumbrance; and the other was a natural anxiety as to whether he was

getting the best possible terms for it. "Of course," he told her, "we may have to sacrifice it, although that would be a blow to us. Things are pressing rather hard, money is terribly tight, even on the best collateral, and I'm afraid we won't be able to hang on much longer. I've had several unsatisfactory interviews with Mr. Sage. I hardly know what he's driving at. But the business has got to be settled. To-morrow I am to see him again. It's touch and go with me. I've about determined to take what I can get from him."

"And will that make everything right?"

Willoughby shook his head. "I only wish it would," he said. "But it will start things moving — help us to hold on to several things that mean big returns by-and-by. Just wait, my dear, and you shall have all the luxury that any woman can dream of!" He spoke with assurance.

Bella contemplated him amusedly. "My dear Billy Van Haaven," she observed, "how you misread me! The kind of luxury you have in mind would bore me to the verge of distraction. It would be like a tight shoe on my spirit. A great mausoleum of a house to live in — a garage exuding limousines — an army of flunkies — a whirl of social life — and clothes — *clothes* — *CLOTHES!* That's most women's idea of bliss. But mine — never! If wealth is worth anything, it means freedom, Billy. The freedom to live one's life as one pleases. The power to help on to success people and movements; the ability to disentangle one's self from one's environment at any moment and to fly to the ends of the planet! I love simple things and simple people — incidentally, that's why I like you, Billy! — I like a tailor-

made dress better than fluffy things, and the wilderness — in moderation — better than the city, and —”

“Plain men better than handsome ones —” Willoughby put in teasingly.

Bella shook a slim finger at him. “No!” she retorted. “No more compliments for little Billy! Just think,” she added, whimsically. “If I should turn your head with flattery, you’d have to walk home backward.”

She looked so provocative, her head tilted back, her turquoise eyes half shut, and a charming smile curving her lips, that Willoughby bent toward her and kissed the white warm throat.

The caress had a singular effect upon him. He paled and his pulses beat to a new and overwhelming rhythm. It is probable that he had never before realized to the full, what power the woman he loved possessed over him. But with his usual instinct for self-repression he disguised his emotion and shortly after rose to go.

But Bella’s keen eyes had been upon him to some effect. As he parted from her, she let her warm hand lie in his a moment longer than usual. “I hope,” she began hesitatingly, “you understand, Billy, that I’m giving you only a sort of glorified friendship. I’ve had so much of the other kind of love,” she went on, candidly. “I was married so young. Love was such a tumultuous affair with Duncan. He was either wildly jealous or passionately contrite and devoted. It was like living in a supertropical climate. You can imagine I got more pain than joy out of marriage. But this —” she told him, earnestly, “is the first time I ever acknowledged the fact in speech.”

Willoughby nodded thoughtfully. Bella’s words relieved him of a certain hurt feeling about that first mar-

riage. He felt all the assurance of the lover that he could make her happier than anyone else in the universe.

Bella made a movement with both hands outflung as if she cast all her past life, with its discomfort and disappointment, behind her. "So you can imagine, Billy," she told him, gravely, "what your quiet, undemonstrative affection means to me. It is so restful. So quiet. So friendly."

He pressed her hand, gratefully.

"And now," she said, briskly, to lessen the emotional tension, "what time to-morrow shall you see the Belton, Sage people?"

"About eleven," he answered. "I'll call you up when it's all through, and perhaps you will have luncheon with me, to celebrate."

It was late the next morning when Bella woke. It was one of the mild, lazy, springlike days that surprise the weather-wise in midwinter. She lay awhile drowsily, her arms above her head, in that pleasant realm of content that lies equidistant between sleep and waking. The sparrows twittered in the tree just outside her window. A soft air blew in, fanning the lace at the pane. Then, vague but insistent, a thought, or rather a succession of thoughts, drifted through her mind. It began with the old man and his wife whom she had met the day before. Their bereavement — their consolation through philanthropy. A home — no, not a home, but homes, for desolate young girls. The personal element — the giving of love to each lonely girl — love and care. What a beautiful, warm charity! Little separate houses in a sort of communal proximity — not far off, but in the very heart of the city, where the girls' everyday work lay. It

seemed so practical. She hoped, sleepily, they would soon be able to realize their ideal. The real estate men were, Mr. Moriss had said, so slow — so mysterious — they had promised to look up a site for him before he sailed, but they kept putting him off — one excuse after another —

Bella sat up in bed. She was suddenly wide awake. Her mind was snapping from one thing to another like an electric spark. Had she happened on the possible reason for Sage's peculiar behavior in the matter of the Royale Apartments? Was this their client — this rich man — her old friend Moriss? Were they trying to beat down Willoughby's price so that they might reap a tremendous profit from the transaction? Was this the reason they had been — as they told Mr. Moriss —“unable to find” a suitable site before the old gentleman started on his trip? It flashed on her that the Kempton-Royale was the very thing Mr. Moriss wanted — the block of apartments in a central location, yet in an inexpensive part of the city — the very feature that had damned it for Uncle Pemberton's purpose. Billy had been puzzled, he said, by their pertinacity in the face of the low offers they continued to make for the big property. Was this, by any chance, the reason?

If so — if so — then why should not Billy sell direct to Mr. Moriss and get the middleman's profit too? Why not? Her eyes flashed to the tiny clock by her bed.

A quarter past twelve! And they were to meet at Billy's office at eleven! Was it too late? Had the property already passed out of his hands? And would she dare, on a mere guess, to stop the sale of it if it were not consummated? *Would she dare?* Would Billy even consider her intuition in the matter? She felt herself

whirling between two purposes. Should she keep silent — let the deal go through at great loss to the Van Haavens? Or should she hold it up on the mere vague chance — the bare supposition — that a better price was forthcoming?

She reached for the phone by the bedside.

It seemed an eternity before the buzzing — the inchoate sounds — the drifting, mysterious crepitations — subsided, and the pert official voice demanded her want, and switched her to the proper quarter. Even then, she had to wait a moment while the voices of men in conversation at Billy's office reached her — wordless but importunate.

Then came the welcome challenge.

“Billy!” she called, breathlessly.

CHAPTER XXI

It was a trifle after eleven when the lanky office boy threw open the door and announced Mr. Sage and his attorney.

"You'll be glad," Sage observed, with a dry chuckle, as he shed his overcoat and laid it carefully on a chair, "to get this incubus off your shoulders, Van Haaven."

Willoughby smiled the slow unwilling smile of the reserved man forced to a conventional demonstration. "Not glad enough to let the property go at too small a figure," he announced.

"No, no, no!" Mr. Sage responded, hastily. "Of course not. Fortunately you're in good hands—if I do say it myself," he added, with a deprecatory gesture.

Willoughby made no endorsement of the other's statement. In his heart of hearts he doubted it. "The offer you made me last week," he began, reaching into a pigeon-hole as he spoke and taking out a sheaf of memoranda, bristling with jotted figures, "was very much below what the property is worth, I must remind you, Mr. Sage. Even taking into consideration all you have said, it is an unheard-of figure for you to offer and for us to accept." He paused and scanned the slips he held.

Mr. Sage's dry, thin hands, sought his necktie and wrestled with it. "No one else would offer as much at this time," he ventured, slyly, his fox-like eyes observing the other for the effect of the remark.

Willoughby's impassive countenance showed nothing. "You don't expect me to believe," he said, quietly, "that Belton, Sage and Company are unduly altruistic in the matter."

If Sage was taken aback by this remark, he was too much master of himself to let the other see it. He chose to regard it as a pleasantry, "No more altruistic in buying than your own firm in selling," he retorted, with his rattling chuckle. "As a matter of fact, Belton, Sage and Company are not so keen about the deal that they want to haggle over it."

His lawyer nodded in solemn agreement.

Willoughby was silent. Inwardly he was wondering how he should force the price up — even a few thousands would count heavily at this juncture. He knew these people were too sapient not to have looked the matter up from all points of view. How much did they know?

As if Sage had read his thought he observed patronizingly.

"What a pity it is that Mr. Pemberton Van Haaven did not arrange better about time clauses in those mortgages! He was over-optimistic, I suppose."

Willoughby flushed resentfully. He told himself that these ferrets knew everything about the property, even before the time came for his lawyer to enlighten them. It was quite reasonable to believe that they guessed to a dot his resources of the moment — his most obscure embarrassment — his last and least reason for desiring to put the deal through. He rang for the lanky boy with considerable vigor.

"Has Mr. Brownson come yet?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Ask him to step in."

A tall man with a scholarly stoop — the Van Haaven attorney — stood a moment on the threshold, then came forward and shook hands with Willoughby, bowing to the other two.

"Ready for the formalities, Mr. Van Haaven?" he asked, in the super-cheerful tone of the surgeon interrogating the patient on the way to the operating table.

Ensued, the usual preliminary skirmishing. Mr. Sage's lawyer had a discussion with Mr. Brownson on the legal turn of a phrase. Then Sage himself objected to another and had a lively argument with both of them.

The thing began to wear on Willoughby. It seemed interminable. He leaned toward his lawyer. "Can't you hurry this thing?" he asked in an undertone.

Brownson nodded. "You and Mr. Sage can sign now," he said. "Right here on this paper, and here on this one." He pushed a couple of documents toward him.

Willoughby scanned them, then took his pen from his pocket. He held it a moment poised over the paper.

Bzzzzzzzz! The desk phone interrupted.

The first sound of Bella's voice made Willoughby aware that something out of the ordinary was in the wind. He was careful to speak coolly and impersonally in return, so that the others in the room might have no idea that a woman was on the wire, and to word his answers so as to give them no clue of what was being said.

"Has the deal gone through, Billy?" she asked breathlessly.

"No."

"Can you call it off?"

"What!" he asked in astonishment.

"I know something that would explain Sage's puzzling actions about it," she told him, speaking very rapidly as if she knew that time was doubly precious at this juncture. "And also there is reason to suppose that you can make a much better bargain direct. I don't dare to give you concrete facts — couldn't in any case, Billy, for it's partly guess work, although I feel very certain about it."

"Something new?" he asked.

"Something that I got hold of at the tea the other day," she answered. "But I didn't put two and two together at first. I'll come in by the next train and talk it out with you."

"Do!" he returned, cordially, but no one in the room dreamed that the tone hid a lover's rapture at the near meeting with his beloved.

"Does it seem a great deal to ask — to put things off for an unproved suspicion?" Bella said.

"Well," he returned, "it's a pretty large order. But I'll see you as soon as possible." Then, in the most businesslike, matter-of-fact tone he could assume, "You'll excuse me — I'm in the midst of a business interview. Good-by!"

He fumbled with the papers before him a moment, keeping his face turned from the others. Suppose he was throwing away this deal only to lose in the end the vague chance of which even Bella herself was not sure? The counter-thought flashed into his mind, that this interruption might mean the extra price he had been trying to wring from Belton, Sage and Company. He would make the most of it. He forced his impassive face into a confidence he was far from feeling.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "I have just received

word of a better offer for this property," tapping the papers with his finger. "I must ask you to defer the conclusion of the matter till — say, to-morrow."

Sage clawed at his necktie. His little ferret eyes snapped as at an escaping rat. "What!" he champed. "All this bother for nothing? — to drop everything and come here — to lose time on a deal that you throw over at a moment's notice? I must say, Van Haaven," he sputtered, "it isn't a decent way to treat people!"

"Sorry!" Willoughby rejoined. "But I question whether anyone else with his own interests at heart would do differently. To-morrow isn't a long way off. The deal can surely wait twenty-four hours."

Sage's thin face flushed, angrily. Then in a breath he was suave and cool. "As you please!" he said, shrugging his shoulders indifferently. He motioned his lawyer and rose to go. At the threshold he turned. "By the way," he said, as though in afterthought, "if a few thousand more would fix the matter to-day —"

His sharp eyes searched Willoughby's face.

The latter made a non-committal rejoinder.

Sage closed the door behind him with a certain reluctance and was gone.

Brownson, too, gathered up his papers and set out for other legal fields.

Doubt pressed in upon Willoughby as he sat alone. He was not happy over the delay. Had he done right? If Bella's supposition proved groundless — whatever it might be — he would have the humiliation of coming back to Belton, Sage and Company — of admitting to them that the proposition of which he had spoken so confidently had fallen through. Had their own offer to the Van Haaven

firm been a fairly good one this would not matter. But to come back to an offer so manifestly below the value of the property would be a bitter pill to swallow. Then he found comfort in Sage's voluntary addition to the offer—the delay was worth something in that. He would keep him to it. At the same time he had great confidence in Bella's business sense. The way in which she had managed the hotel in Mipawan, though a small instance, was enlightening. She was not the woman to go off at half-cock on a mere feeling about such things as this. The thought cheered him. He schooled himself to patience till she should come.

The lanky boy flung open the door with an unusual flourish. Bella stood on the threshold. She always impressed Willoughby with her vitality. To-day there was an added sparkle in her blue-brown eyes, a dash of color in her smooth cheeks, a subtle tension in her attitude. He could not have told why, when the door closed and shut them into his private office, he made no move to greet her loverwise, but took her gloved hand into the firm, swift clasp he would have given a man.

She did not even notice the omission. It is probable it would have pleased her if she had not been absorbed otherwise. She sat down, unfastened her coat and plunged into the subject, as she newly saw it, of the Kempton-Royale.

Willoughby followed the narration with intense interest. He would not have been mortal had he not felt some slight disappointment at the close. In spite of what Bella had said as to the vagueness of her information, he expected something more definite.

"Well," he asked after a perceptible pause, "what's your plan?"

She smiled at the doubt in his tone, and the notable effort he made to be cheerful and not hurt her feelings. "How about hunting up Mr. Moriss and laying the matter before him," she suggested. "He was lamenting that 'Mother' would have to wait so long before the buildings went up. In the Royale Apartments he would have his scheme of clustered homes ready made. The fact that the property is too near the commercial centers to attract the Four Hundred, is the very thing that would make it fit his plan," she finished.

"It's always been a mystery to me," Willoughby declared, "that Uncle Pemberton should have entered on such a wild business. I fancy that he had already begun to be a little off his balance even then." Willoughby sighed. He had grown very fond of the old man.

"Perhaps this new plan would reconcile him to the sale of the property?" Bella reflected hopefully. "Particularly as the buildings would not have to come down."

"There's something in that," Willoughby agreed. "Let's chase up your millionaire, Bella." He reached for the phone book and turned the pages. "He's a minus quantity," he announced, after a moment, tossing it on the desk.

"I hardly thought he was there," Bella said, "for he properly belongs in Chicago. But it was here his daughter died. They have been here ever since and he, therefore, proposes to have the memorial in this city. That is why he knows so little about the city property. I suppose he put it all into the hands of his real estate agent."

"Belton, Sage and Company," Willoughby interposed.

"If my guess is right," she responded.

"Do you know where the Morisses are staying?"

"No," she returned, "but Evelyn Copley knows, I'm sure."

"Evelyn Copley, it is, then," he announced, and resumed his wanderings in the phone book. "Here it is—Gramercy 581."

He swung the telephone over to Bella, and listened with a shade of anxiety to the one-sided conversation that ensued.

"Evelyn, this is Bella MacFallon."

"Oh, thank you so much. No, I'm in town on business."

"Where can I find the Morisses?"

"Oh, no," laughing, "hardly!"

Long pause, and the whirring of confused tone at the other end. Then Bella in dismay, "What! Already?"

"What time?"

"Thank you! Good-by!"

Bella hung up and turned to Willoughby with obvious disappointment. "Just think!" she said. "The Morisses have sailed—or that is, they are booked to leave at one o'clock on the *Mauritania*."

Willoughby looked at his watch. "Quarter to, now," he announced. "But the steamers don't always clear on time. Let's take a chance on it."

He rose as he spoke, and hustled into his overcoat—caught up hat and gloves. Together they dashed out of the office, whisked into the elevator and into the street. They hailed a passing taxi and whirled away in the direction of the wharves.

The minute they turned into the long wharf, they knew

they had lost. A crowd of people streamed from the river end of the wharf. Some of them were dabbing their eyes furtively with their handkerchiefs. A line of stevedores were wheeling empty trucks the length of the wharf in a leisurely way that showed the end of their labors.

Willoughby looked at Bella with disappointment visible in his face. His belief in the possibility of Bella's scheme had gained zest with the excitement of the chase. Now he felt something almost definitely lost.

Bella patted his hand in the motherly way she assumed with him. "Too bad, Billy!" she said. "We'll have to wait now, till they come back. A month or two, Evelyn told me."

His face cleared. "Never say die," he said, "while the Marconi is Marconi-ing!" He ordered the chauffeur to the nearest office, and while the taxi swayed over the cobbles and swung round corners, they put their heads together and composed the wireless to Mr. Moriss. It read:

"Have found ideal site for memorial. Consider no other till seen. Answer.

"BELLA MACFALLON."

This despatched, they went on a voyage of discovery in this unfamiliar part of town and hunted up a place to lunch. It was the dining-room of a quiet and unfashionable hotel. They sat a long time at the table after finishing.

Willoughby discussed a further loan he would have to negotiate to enable him to hold the property till Mr. Moriss was able to decide on its purchase.

For convenience and to save delay they had ordered the

reply to be held at the office from which the message, signed with Bella's name, had been sent. After a reasonable time they called there for the answer. It was brief and to the point.

"All right.

ABNER MORISS."

That very day a letter was sent to Mr. Moriss's foreign address, describing in full the Van Haaven property and asking him to communicate with them.

His letter in response was more than they had dared to hope. In the first place, Bella's conjecture about Belton, Sage and Company was correct. They were the firm who had acted so slowly and mysteriously in finding the site for the memorial. And their attempt to purchase the Van Haaven property at the smallest possible figure, confirmed her intuitions and more than justified her for virtually calling off the negotiations at the crucial moment. Mr. Moriss wrote that he had informed Belton, Sage and Company that their activities in regard to the memorial site were no longer desired, thus leaving himself free to deal with the Van Haaven firm. And he added that he and Mrs. Moriss would probably be on the ground considerably before the option expired, since "Mother" was impatient to make a beginning.

Willoughby was full of pride in the woman he loved. That she should have made so accurate a guess in this matter, was to him nothing less than a miracle. Of course, the pending business between him and Sage had been called off on the receipt of Mr. Moriss's wireless. But Willoughby fancied Sage still kept an eye on the

property. It was not to be imagined that he discerned any connection between his dismissal as Moriss's real estate agent and the discontinuation of the Kempton Block deal. As it was, he probably fancied his discharge to be the whim of an old man, easily adjusted when Moriss returned.

CHAPTER XXII

And now the holders of the mortgages began to press Van Haaven. Things went rapidly from bad to worse. The day arrived when the big property was threatened with immediate foreclosure, if the interest were not forthcoming. Other creditors also were pressing. For obvious reasons Willoughby had not tried to gain time by mention of Mr. Moriss's name and possible intentions. No doubt that would have helped, had he had something more definite to offer.

He spent the whole of one day and half the next trying to get enough to carry him through. But money was abnormally tight — the soundest collateral unavailing. The thing was impossible. He was in despair.

The strain he was under showed plainly in his drawn face. Bella noticed it when he came to her. He had kept it from her, because he knew she would, perhaps, feel responsible, and he knew she was building high on Moriss's purchase of the property. He simply could not bear to tell her that short as was the time set for Moriss's return, they could not wait — that the property would go under the sheriff's hammer if he were unable to get needed cash before the end of the week. Bella forced the information out of him.

"Dear Sir Woe-begone," she questioned him, her candid eyes full on his, "tell me the worst — the very worst you have to tell."

He was glad, then, to blurt it all out to her. It was a

comfort to share the miserable business with someone.

"To think," he said, "how much we have spent just hanging on — and now practically to lose all!"

Bella hardly seemed to hear. She was leaning towards him, her face quite pale. "If it were in my power," she began — "but my income has gone to nothing in the last five years. And I can't touch my capital — Oh, it's been a terrible mix-up since Duncan died. He left things in bad shape. But —"

She was silent a long moment. Then the color flashed up into her cheeks. "Willoughby," she said breathlessly, "I believe Hicks would lend it to you!"

"O'Neill?" Willoughby looked incredulous. "Has he it?"

The question seemed to amuse her. "Oh," she explained, "he has enough for our purpose. And that he would lend me — any time — for any reason. He told me so, long ago — when Captain MacFallon died. I wouldn't take it then. I can wire him to-night."

Willoughby drew a long breath. "If I thought O'Neill could lend it — and would — the collateral is all right, you understand."

"Let's ask him at once," she advised, and began to rummage in her desk for her cousin's itinerary. "Here we are!" she exclaimed. "San Francisco, the Palace."

"Good!" Willoughby ejaculated in a tone of relief. On second thought he had no rosy surety that Bella would succeed in raising the money. But it was a comfort to be doing something.

Together they walked to the station and sent the telegram. Bella asked it in her own name to save explanation and added, "details by mail."

At last it was off — duly marked “Rush,” which seems to be a word of no particular meaning to the company, but has a soothing effect on the sender of a message, leading him to suppose that all other business is swept off the wire till his telegram has clicked the way to its destination.

Bella knew without question that Willoughby would not sleep that night without special means, so she told him guilefully that she was fairly spoiling for a walk. Then, instead of going back to the inn, she walked him far up a lonely road into the very country, chattering about nothing in particular, but everything that led away from the subject in hand. When they returned and he left her at the inn door, he was surprised to find how tired he was, and how his mood had lightened.

He quickened his pace, swinging along till he was in a glow. Once home, he stole quietly up to his room, had a cold sponge down, and got to bed, prepared to lie awake as he had lain every night for a week past. But much to his surprise, it was daylight when he woke lying in the same position in which he had turned in the previous night.

He lay a few moments blinking at the light and trying to recall his rosy expectations. Things looked different by day. Bella had impressed her natural hopefulness on his mind. Not, he told himself grimly, that there was really a chance that Bella would be able to get the money. He even speculated whether Belton, Sage and Company would act in the deal under present circumstances. It was a forlorn hope.

He sprang out of bed and faced the day.

At noon, Bella called up and said she was afraid that

O'Neill must be away on a trip, since the answer had not yet arrived. She was plainly ill at ease, though she tried to hide it from Willoughby. The very fact that she phoned to him, showed him that she was trying to break the expected disappointment by slow degrees. They both knew that O'Neill and Holbroke had planned to take side trips of a few days to places of interest. Probably their mail would not be forwarded, since they would remain only a few hours, or at best a day, in one place. If the telegram had happened to hit one of these times —

"We did our best, Billy," she said brightly. "If we lose —"

"We'll try something else," Willoughby interrupted, with a cheerfulness that was far from his mood. He fancied he heard her sigh.

After a few more exchanges in the way of conversation Bella rang off. Willoughby hung up with a distinct sense of depression.

As much to divert himself as because it was really necessary, he busied himself with another matter. He was so absorbed — so buried in papers, that he started when the phone tinkled at his elbow.

He picked up the receiver.

"Oh, Billy!" the beloved voice announced. "The answer has just come. And it is yes, and more than yes!"

"Thank God!" Willoughby ejaculated.

"I can't talk it out on the phone," Bella said. "I'll come into town right away. But I must hurry. There's a train in a few minutes. Good-by."

Willoughby felt thankfulness surge through him like

a wave. "Bella," he said, fervently, "you are a darling!" But she had gone.

It seemed an eternity before she pushed open the door and stood beaming on him like a warm sun in the winter. Then closing the door softly behind her, she walked slowly into the office, her blue-brown eyes caressing him as she came.

Willoughby sprang out of his seat and met her half way, his hands reaching out to her.

She walked straight into his arms. "Billy," she murmured in a delicious voice, "Billy dear, I'm as happy as a kiddie with a new doll!" She put the telegram into his hand and watched his face as he scanned it.

What she saw made her eyes moisten.

Into Willoughby's lean, melancholy countenance, sharpened in the last few months with anxiety, content crept as if it were a living actuality. Every feature seemed to relax — to soften.

"Yes," the telegram said. "Draft on New York agents by mail. Will instruct them."

He stood a moment motionless, letting the good news soak in. Then held her close without a word. Late that afternoon, being in a frivolous mood, she reminded him that he had not said, "Thank you, kindly!" much to his chagrin.

After a few moments, they sat down and talked over the newest development. Willoughby picked up the telegram which lay between them on the desk. "It wasn't O'Neill after all," he observed, in a puzzled tone.

"Yes," she returned. "Of course it was!"

He pointed to the telegram. It was signed with a name strange to him.

Bella paused ever so slightly. There was a shade of embarrassment in her manner. "Oh," she returned lightly, "that's just — well, you might call it a nickname of Hicks."

"Indeed!" Willoughby commented drily. "He seems to have a good many of them. But I don't care a rap," he hastened to add, "which one he uses when he does me a stupendous favor like this." He tapped the telegram and smiled in his slow rather constrained way.

But several times thereafter, Willoughby surprised Bella twinkling at him in a way she had when a joke was a bit beyond his vision. It generally teased him. Not this time, however, for with the advent of O'Neill's message, tremendously overshadowing everything else, he was too deeply relieved to care about any such trifle as a mislaid "mot pour rire."

CHAPTER XXIII

It was the day Holbroke and O'Neill returned from their western trip, sunburnt and in high spirits. The village palpitated with their arrival.

Willoughby rapped on the door of Allaine's room.

"Come!" she responded, lazily.

She sat before a daintily furnished toilet table, manicuring her fingers. In her pale-blue negligee, and lacy cap, she looked to Willoughby a particularly useless form of the ultra-feminine. He frowned a little as he crossed the room.

"Look at this!" he said, thrusting a paper at her.

Allaine contemplated it for a fleeting moment.
"Well?" she murmured languidly.

The tone incensed her brother. "You have run up an enormous bill for clothes," he told her, "and all you can say is, 'Well?'" He surveyed her disapprovingly.

Allaine smiled, provokingly. She felt a mild satisfaction, that Willoughby should have a little discomfort in return for that he had caused the family by his "ridiculous engagement." She had incurred the bill without compunction. She faced the disclosure without regret.

Willoughby wanted to shake her. Mentally he contrasted her with Bella. "It's a pity," he observed, "that women are not better sports. You knew that we've been hanging on by our eyelids, financially, for a little eternity; but all you could do was to make things harder by run-

ning up bills for the estate to pay!" He spoke with cold severity.

Allaine yawned, overtly. "Why kick up all this fuss?" she inquired, surveying her hands, with interest. "Pay the bill when you can, but for heaven's sake, don't snarl over it."

Willoughby made a gesture of impatience. "You don't know what you're talking about, Allaine!" he said. "You haven't felt the pinch yet. But you will," he added, significantly.

She smiled superbly. "Not I!" she announced with decision. "I'm going to make a decent match and get out."

Willoughby said nothing, only raised his black eyebrows till the resemblance to Aunt Harriet was marked.

Allaine answered the silent inquiry with more animation than she had yet shown. "Mr. Holbroke is coming to dinner to-night," she informed him. "I will probably be engaged to him before he leaves." She spoke with dry certainty as she would have mentioned a train schedule.

Willoughby gazed at her, with exasperation, the bill crumpled in his hand. "I wish him joy of you!" he remarked, viciously, and, turning on his heel, left the room.

To do justice to Allaine's prophetic powers, the clock was striking seven that evening when Holbroke slipped a magnificent diamond on her finger and stooped to seal their betrothal with a kiss. And something in that kiss betrayed to her that Holbroke was a novice in lovemaking. Now Mr. O'Neill — Allaine flushed in Holbroke's arms.

And this vagrant and unwelcome remembrance made the young girl exceedingly gracious to the man whose

diamond flashed on her slender finger. So much so, that Holbroke had no difficulty in believing that he was beloved as he loved. He was enchanted with the new softness in her eyes — the warm charm of her manner. He murmured endearments in the fervent yet diffident way of a passionate man unused to demonstration.

"And now," he began, happily, "I must tell you about myself — my position in the world."

A gleam of intense interest came into Allaine's eyes.

Holbroke drew a deep breath. "In the first place," he resumed, "I am not what you think —"

A discreet cough came from the half open door.

Holbroke's arm dropped from Allaine's slim waist.

She looked around. "What is it, Segby?" she asked, a touch of annoyance in her voice.

"If you please," Segby replied, dutifully, "dinner was served ten minutes ago. The family are all at the table. Miss Harriet sent me." His beady eyes shifted from one to the other in a sort of respectfully impertinent comprehension.

Allaine dismissed him, with a gesture not so good-tempered as it might have been.

"Thank you, Miss!" he murmured, and effaced himself.

"I must tell you this another time," Holbroke said, following her to the hall.

Allaine smiled. She would never let him guess just how well she knew what his "position in the world" was — how much he had to offer her! She felt she could be innocence itself in this matter. And even Holbroke was deceived by her soft and indifferent response: "It really doesn't matter."

As they took their seats at the table, O'Neill's gaze interrogated his friend's face. There was such joy and triumph in the look he gave O'Neill in return, that the young Irishman winced as if under a blow. His eyes wandered to Allaine's hand. But since she had, in a sudden impulse of embarrassment, slipped the stone round to the palm of her hand, he saw nothing to enlighten him further.

After dinner Allaine trailed into the library, and Holbroke, following close after her, sat playing in the growing dusk while Miss Edwina and her sister lingered, drowsily enjoying the sweet sounds and far from realizing that they were treading on enchanted ground.

Presently Holbroke whispered to the young girl, and they slid quietly out of the room. Allaine picked up a scarf and laid it about her shoulders. It was still cool, though the end of April had come.

They passed out of the house and into the box-edged paths of the old-fashioned garden. Someone was there before them — O'Neill, walking up and down moodily, his hands stuffed down into the pockets of his dinner coat.

He came toward them swiftly, looking from one to the other in a sort of wordless question. Holbroke answered it, joyously.

"Congratulate us, old man!"

O'Neill reached out and took a hand of each. "My best wishes!" he said, gravely. Turning he walked with them to the end of the garden lined with lilac bushes in full bloom. But he said nothing more about the new engagement, rather to Allaine's surprise. She felt slightly piqued that he took it so coolly.

Presently O'Neill excused himself and left them alone.

crop to draw their attention. At the same moment a motorcycle whizzed past, so close to Allaine's horse that the man's shoulder grazed her habit.

Her horse plunged — took the bit between his teeth and bolted!

As he dashed past, O'Neill leaned far out of the saddle and cut him smartly across the nose with his whip.

For a breath the horse checked speed. In that moment, O'Neill rode close and caught the rein out of Allaine's hand.

"Hang on!" he shouted.

Within the distance past two fields he got the horse under control and, dismounting, helped Allaine to the ground. She was trembling with fright. It might have been mere imagination on his part, but he felt her arms cling to him, and her jewel eyes were alight with a strange expression. His heart surged up to answer. But he loosed her and stood coolly beside her till Holbrooke galloped up, white and trembling.

He threw himself off his horse and went to her. "My darling!" he exclaimed fervently.

He grasped her gauntleted hands and bent over with obvious relief.

Allaine must have fancied he was about to kiss her in sheer joy over her escape, for she drew her fingers away murmuring embarrassedly, "I'm all right now." Her eyes strayed to O'Neill. He stood apart, abstractedly, flicking his boots with his riding whip.

Holbrooke stooped and with a man's awkwardness brushed the dust from her habit. "I couldn't get this slow beast started," he explained. "If Hicks hadn't been ahead —" He strode forward and wrung the other's

hand. "My word, old man!" he exclaimed. "I'm in a blue funk — thinking what might have happened."

"Well," returned O'Neill, heartily, "it didn't!" He turned to Allaine. "You hung on finely, Miss Van Haaven."

"Yes, didn't she?" Holbroke agreed with evident pride. There was a certain touch of proprietorship in his tone, which a woman delights to hear in the voice of the man she loves. For some reason it did not please Allaine.

"Come!" she commanded imperiously. "Let's get home. We'll be late for dinner."

Holbroke reached for the bridle of her horse, which still hung on O'Neill's arm. But O'Neill checked him. "Don't risk it," he advised, quietly. "Your old nag will be better for her."

Together they changed the saddles from one to the other, while Allaine sat on a stump beside the road and watched the process. Secretly she dreaded and mistrusted one horse as much as another. She would willingly have walked the whole of the distance home. But pride kept her complaisant. She made no protest when Holbroke helped her to mount and put the reins into her hand. From his manner she judged he did not suspect what an effort it was for her to put herself again, in what she believed to be a dangerous situation. She bit her lip nervously and reflected that she had always thought horses stupid — and men too!

She looked up and caught O'Neill's eyes keenly upon her. He knew she was afraid! The indignant color rose in her cheeks. She straightened up as if someone had dropped a cold key down her back.

When they arrived home, Allaine went upstairs to change her habit. The fright of the afternoon had shaken her out of her usual self-control. She felt "upset," emotional — a phase she despised in other people. And the form it took was indignation against Holbroke for not having more definitely laid his prospects before her. She told herself that she knew nothing of her future state — not even what she was (as she put it ungrammatically) "viscountess of." She was far from realizing that this was partly her own fault. Her nature and that of Holbroke were so inflexible that the engagement, so far, had been inevitably a series of adjustments — of disagreements and reconciliations. The time had never been proper for serious discussion. It is true, Allaine led the conversation toward the satisfaction of her very natural curiosity. But Holbroke was seemingly too much in love to take the obvious hint. Perhaps he had some romantic notion of being beloved for himself — not for what he possessed. Allaine smiled at the idea. She sometimes fancied he was testing her affection by refraining from definite statement. It was ridiculous — impertinent. But then, she told herself, petulantly, Mr. Holbroke and his friend did ridiculous things. Pride — that dominant characteristic of Allaine's nature — made her resolve to let Holbroke take his own time in enlightening her. After all, his unfinished remark the night of their engagement told her the main fact — "I am not what you think." Whatever happened, she would never let him guess that she had known he was more than plain "Mr. Holbroke."

Still it was most irritating. She doubted whether any

girl had ever been in a more tantalizing position with her fiancé. And while she dressed, she became momentarily more and more covertly indignant with him. Another grievance was that, although they had been engaged several days, Holbroke had made no move to acquaint her uncle and brother with that fact. Yet again, pride forbade Allaine to hurry matters. She could afford to wait, for, since Holbroke had declared himself, Allaine felt her power over him. It was, indeed, partly this assurance that made the girl a trifle contemptuous of him, in spite of his rank in the world and all it meant to her. After they were safely married, she told herself, they would live as much apart as the majority of people lived.

And with this comforting thought, Allaine completed her toilet, and descended the stairs.

She peeped into the library. Holbroke was there, his nose in a book.

Now Allaine despised "booky" people. She herself was not fond of reading. Coming close upon the uncomfortable reflections that had embittered the last hour, the sight exasperated her.

With one of those sudden impulses that are distinctly feminine, she flashed across the room and snatched the book out of Holbroke's hand. Putting it behind her, she dared him with her eyes, to recover it.

Most men would have responded in kind — would have engaged in a playful struggle and finally recaptured the book, exacting perhaps the penalty of a kiss. But Holbroke was not woman-wise. Reading was his passion. Dignity was his habit. He gravitated to the rôle of quiet resentment, made no effort to retake his book, no

effort to exert the masculine over the feminine. Allaine for the moment had rudely jostled his ideal of her. He stood looking down at her without a word.

Allaine's mood changed. Her half-mischievous smile vanished. She stared haughtily at him for a moment. Then laying the book on the table, she left the room and fled into the garden. Her new mood returned full force. She was highly discontented, strung taut with protest against the whole scheme of things. She had a sudden doubt of Holbroke—of his being a titled man. Surely he would have said something about it before now if he really were a viscount! She told herself that he was acting like an adventurer.

The garden was soft with dusk. Peonies glowed beside the path—great feathery flowers, crimson, white, pink, with their glossy leaves. Allaine snatched at one as she passed swiftly along, and began viciously to shred it, strewing the way behind her. Her eyes were bright with angry tears.

A turn in the path brought her almost in collision with someone coming in the opposite direction. Allaine's head was down—she found herself face to face with O'Neill.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked in astonishment. Allaine was not given to weeping. She had never, since she could remember, cried for anything. Up to this time she had had everything she wanted without crying for it. Now, suddenly, she felt forlorn, desirous of something vaguely sensed and out of reach.

"Poor little girl!" O'Neill said softly. In his tone was the comfort one gives a sorrowful child.

It stung her pride. She drew herself away. Her

tears dried as by magic. "You're as hateful as he is!" she announced indignantly.

"I don't doubt it," O'Neill agreed heartily. "But who is 'he'?"

"Oh," she flung out, more to herself than to him, "I'll never be able to endure him! He bores me—irritates me. Here!" she exclaimed, slipping the ring off her finger and holding it out to O'Neill. "Give him back his ring. I will never marry him in all the world!"

O'Neill's brick-red face paled. He made no move to take the ring from her hand. "That is between you and Holbroke," he told her, gravely. But his heart leaped inconceivably. His ice princess was waking to life. But in justice to his friend he kept cool and aloof.

Allaine must have felt this, for, presently, she turned and walked away without a word, her head noticeably in the air.

O'Neill watched her disappear into the house, loving every line of her charming figure and its indolent movement. At dinner they were all three constrained. O'Neill glanced across the table at Allaine's hands. Holbroke's ring was gone. And as if to emphasize that fact, she wore no others.

Holbroke's dark cheeks bore a spot of color. He sent glances of appeal—of questioning protest to his fiancée. But she gave no sign of seeing, or of caring to see.

O'Neill felt downright sorry. But it was all turning out exactly as he had foreseen. He had known these two were as water and oil—they must always be immiscible. It was well that they should find it out now. The one point of which O'Neill was not sure, and had never been sure was this: How far would Allaine cru-

cify her emotions for ambition? She was cold of nature. She had nothing but contempt for love. Women, every day, sold themselves for the material things of life. Would she?

After dinner the two men stayed only a little while; then tramped home to the village.

Holbrooke said nothing, till they turned into the town. Then he told O'Neill, laconically, that the engagement was broken — that Allaine had been most unjust to him.

O'Neill received the news in silence. He could not say he regretted the outcome. He would not say anything else. But he wondered whether Allaine's ambition would not, after all, get the better of her and bend her to a renewal of the engagement.

By morning, Holbrooke was all repentance. He called himself a brute and made every possible — and impossible — excuse for Allaine. Later, a great box of lavender orchids mingled with lilies of the valley arrived at the Van Haaven house, testifying to his remorse. Allaine was gracious. She phoned to thank Holbrooke and to bid him come that evening — she was socially engaged for the afternoon, she said. But the real fact in the case was that she had passed an uncomfortable night, tossing restlessly, pursued by unwelcome thoughts, and purposed making up for it by an afternoon nap. She had already resolved to make up with the young nobleman.

But something thrust itself continually between the girl and her dreams of social triumph. It was the memory of O'Neill's kiss! Wise was the builder of fairy tales when he made the Prince wake his spellbound lady with a warm human caress! Not that it was Allaine's first experience — by no means. She was no more in-

nocent of such things — the tag ends of trivial loves — than is any young girl of her age. But O'Neill's kiss was different. She could not forget it, and often, when talking with him, she felt the color rising in her cheeks for no other reason. It made her impatient with herself — petulant with him. She was desperately afraid he would guess her thought. The unwelcome supposition crossed her mind that one might easily fall in love with this unusual young man, if his position matched Holbroke's. As it was — never!

At twilight the two men swung open the gate and made their way up the box-bordered walk to the house.

For reasons of tact, O'Neill stopped at the foot of the steps. "I'll take a stroll in the garden, old man," he said.

Holbroke nodded, preoccupiedly, and left him.

Left to himself, O'Neill wandered about in the dim sweet-scented garden. He felt this to be the turning point in the affair between Allaine and Holbroke. Would ambition win? Would the woman he loved, sell herself for position — for a place in the social world? O'Neill was not a religious man, so far as the formalities of church went, but he found himself praying softly and disconnectedly that Allaine's better nature would prevail.

They say wrong who declare that love is blind. It is only passion that goes with shut eyes. True love has a divine insight — it has to do with potentialities — it sees deeper than the mere surface. O'Neill saw Allaine as a rather crude, cold soul in an exquisite body. But she had infinite possibilities, he believed, if once she were awakened. If only she could be made to feel her better self, if only she were alive to something higher than the merely

material, she would count heavily for herself and others. And beyond all O'Neill's analysis of her, she held a charm quite intangible — unexplainable — to him, irresistible.

Someone flitted down a nearby path as noiselessly as a moth in the dusk, and vanished in a tiny arbor at the end of the garden.

A lover's eyes told O'Neill that it was Allaine. He followed, swiftly.

When she heard his approach she called out, sharply.
"I told you not to come!" she said.

It flashed across O'Neill's mind that she had mistaken him for Holbroke. "It's I —" he answered, "O'Neill."

Allaine made no reply.

He stepped into the arbor and groped his way to her. His outstretched hand touched the soft warmth of her bare shoulder. She was in evening dress. O'Neill felt the mystery of her — the delicate mystery every strong, clean man feels in the presence of a woman, a feeling that senses not only the body, but the subtle essence of the soul itself, as one sees both the exquisite form and color of a lamp and the flame that burns within.

O'Neill was aware that she faced him in the dark.

"I have refused Mr. Holbroke for good and all!" she said, defiantly.

"Why?" O'Neill asked, simply.

The question seemed to floor her for the moment. "I can't endure him!" she answered in the cold hard tone of her present mood.

O'Neill's heart leaped. "Of course you know," he began, "that Holbroke is a very good —" ("Man" was the word he intended.)

"A very good match," she finished, misunderstanding

him, "but a very uninteresting husband! Oh, I know all about it—that he is a somebody—I knew it from the very first. That is why I accepted him—the only reason!" she confessed, recklessly.

O'Neill was silent.

She interrupted his silence as condemnation. "You're shocked," she said.

"Not shocked," he returned, "but very much encouraged."

Through the dark, O'Neill could feel her staring at him. He laughed—softly—caressingly. He groped for her hands—found and held them. "You are not the girl," he told her, "who would throw over a profitable reality—a title, we'll say—for a mere vision. You have some definite idea of love that you had not six months ago. Isn't it so?"

She attempted to draw her fingers out of his grasp—thought better of it, and let them lie in his warm ones. "Perhaps," she murmured, wondering why she suddenly began to feel again the serenity that was her natural mood.

"I wish," O'Neill said, naïvely, "that I could give you a still more definite idea." He had a feeling—it was only a feeling—that she smiled. Her face was a gray blur against the dark of the arbor.

"Please don't smile," he begged her, whimsically, "for I'm going to propose again, and it's a very serious matter with me." He drew a deep breath and began. "Don't think," he said, earnestly, "that I'm going to tell you your eyes are like amber jewels, and your cheeks like magnolia petals, and—well, that sort of thing! Of course they are, but that's aside from the main question. But ever

since I met you, the thought of you has mixed up with everything I've done and felt. It's one thing to moon over a girl in the twilight, and another to think of that girl in the broad noon — when a fellow's racing down the rapids in a canoe, as we did out West; or poking round in a strange town, or playing cards on the train, or doing the thousand and one commonplace things that come into a fellow's life. That's the way I think about you. You've come into my life to stay, whether you say no or yes to me." O'Neill paused, then added in an undertone, " You'd make a corkin' little chum for a man, Allaine, if you only liked him well enough."

Allaine was silent a moment. " I thought," she observed with a faint touch of malice, " you were going to propose to me."

" Well, didn't I?" O'Neill demanded, rather bewildered.

" No," Allaine answered. " You merely told me what you thought of me."

It was rather a difficult matter to embarrass O'Neill.

" I'll do it now," he announced in the most matter-of-fact way. " Dear Allaine, will you marry me?" She heard his heart pulse in the words.

She was silent a long moment. Then without exactly knowing how it came about, she was in O'Neill's arms, and he was telling her, joyously, that they two were going to be happy ever afterward. Yet it was all with a certain restraint which pleased, while it piqued her. She flushed scarlet there in the dark when — for the second time — he kissed her.

Presently O'Neill's fingers chanced to touch her shoul-

der. It was cool as marble. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "No wrap?"

"I forgot it," she told him, remembering as if it had been a hundred years ago, her mood when she had fled from Holbroke.

O'Neill took off his coat and, throwing it round her, buttoned her into it. "Come!" he commanded. "Let's get into the house."

Together they stepped down out of the arbor and along the path to the house. They found the lower part of the house deserted. Holbroke, it appeared, had gone home without a word. The aunts were upstairs in their own apartments. Pemberton was wandering uneasily about the upper hall. In the library a light burned. Willoughby sat there reading. He looked up in surprise when they entered. He had not known that O'Neill was about. He shaded his eyes with his hand and stared at Allaine buttoned snugly into O'Neill's coat.

O'Neill caught her hand and led her up to Willoughby as if she had been a small child in line for commendation. "We two have a rippin' secret," he announced, gaily, "which we are burning to share with you."

Willoughby looked bewildered. "But I thought —" he began and stopped —

"Everyone can have a second thought, y'know," O'Neill observed, twinkling. "Take another."

"Oh —" Willoughby remarked in the natural embarrassment of a reserved man confronted with other people's love affairs.

The tone and the expression were highly provocative. The two before him struggled a moment, then gave way

to mirth that spoke well for the total lack of mawkishness in the new bond.

Willoughby rose. He shook hands with O'Neill in a slightly preoccupied manner. "I'm sure I —" he began, then left that sentence, too, unfinished. Only his sister understood that Willoughby was too sincere to congratulate any man on an alliance with her. Her lip curled. She loosened her fingers from O'Neill's, crossed the room and sat down in front of the fireplace where a shoulder of embers showed a recent fire whose warmth still hung in the air.

O'Neill joined her, and they sat talking, wrapped in the sweetly intimate haze that follows a well-conducted engagement.

He slipped an antique ring from his finger and put it on hers. "It's miles too big," he said. "But it will remind you. And any day you like we two will go to town and find one that will fit."

She drooped a little. Her mood changed on the instant with a disturbing thought. When she looked up he saw that her eyes were full of misery. She looked extraordinarily unhappy. Possibly she remembered and regretted Holbroke's magnificent love token.

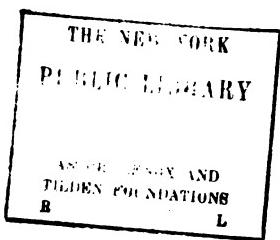
O'Neill bent toward her. "What's the matter?" he asked, tenderly.

Allaine hesitated. A tear escaped and ran down her cheek. "I'm such a fool," she whispered. "I've spoiled all my chances." Her chin quivered. "I hate to be poor!" From a mysterious somewhere she fished out a tiny handkerchief and buried her face in it.

Something about the whole proceeding made O'Neill smile. But his voice was grave as he said. "It's not



"I've spoiled all my chances I hate to be poor!"



too late, Allaine. Do you want to give me back my ring?" The question hung significantly between them for a full minute before she spoke.

"No," she answered, deliberately and with a certain selfscorn, "I don't. That is why I am such a fool."

She turned away from him as if unwilling to make the admission.

O'Neill put his hands on her shoulders and made her face him.

"My dear," he declared, softly and fervently, "you will never regret being just that sort of fool — never, so long as you live!"

The dark lashes veiled her eyes from him. She was a little ashamed of her display of emotion. And she was amazed and not quite comfortable at the sudden face-about in her views. For this new feeling for O'Neill had swept everything before it — it was hurrying her along like a swift, irresistible tide, counter to all her ambitions. She did not dare to admit to herself how much the young Irishman meant to her — more than anyone she had ever known — more than anything else in the world!

Yet even so, taking the essential coolness of her disposition into account her sober second thought might still have given Holbroke the victory and healed the present breach. But the scandalized opposition Allaine felt was in store for her from her aunts gave the engagement to O'Neill the additional excitement of an adventure.

CHAPTER XXIV

Early the next evening, O'Neill appeared at the Van Haaven house. Allaine had invited both men to dinner. For obvious reasons, Holbroke had declined. He was in the depths of woe, and inclined to be bitter with O'Neill. The latter understood his mood and effaced himself. He knew — had known from the beginning, that the affair had not gone deep with his friend. Holbroke lived too much in a world of books and scholarly concerns to care with his whole soul for any woman. He was suffering now — pangs that seemed supreme to him. But he would get over it presently, O'Neill fancied, with only a trace of cynicism to show for it. That O'Neill should be the man who had supplanted him was bitter, however. It strained heavily at the friendship between them.

The two aunts had been told of the broken engagement. They were openly resentful, and they harangued Allaine, as forcibly as they dared, about throwing away the best chance she had ever had. But when they heard that their headstrong niece had actually accepted O'Neill, they were aghast. "A mere nobody!" Aunt Harriet declared. "You'll be buried in a back street! No one will call on you!" And Aunt Edwina added severely, "Cyril tells me, he thinks that nice Mr. Holbroke — a man of title, my dear! — even paid his friend's expenses over here. I should think he would have more gratitude than to cut him out with you, Allaine!"

They gave vent to much more on this order, forgetting

as people will, that every word was as a nail to clinch Allaine's resolve to throw herself away, as they termed it. By the time evening arrived, and with it O'Neill, she was feeling nearer enthusiasm in the matter of her engagement than before. She was in a reckless mood — for her. For the first time in her life she was acting with a total disregard of material issues. She told herself, with some natural surprise, that if John O'Neill were the coachman, or the chauffeur, she couldn't feel more set in the affair. To her cool nature it was as heady as champagne. She felt as daring as a pirate!

O'Neill was impressed with the warmth of her greeting. Yet even so, he kept the stern course he had laid out for himself, and made no attempt to coerce her into sentiment. He merely held her hand a trifle longer than usual and let his eyes say something of what he felt for her. Well he knew — this astute young man! — that the one sure way to displease Allaine was to be over-demonstrative with her.

The butler, who had a growing distaste for the Van Haavens as their fortunes waned, was openly contemptuous of the Irishman as he let him in — merely motioning to the hat rack, and making no move to take his hat and coat. But as Segby's stiff and insolent back disappeared down the hall, he would have been highly offended to know that O'Neill closed one eye solemnly and slowly after him, as if in possession of an excellent joke.

O'Neill felt frost in the family atmosphere. The two aunts were scandalized at their headstrong niece for having made choice of him. And since they could make no adequate remonstrance to her, they took no particular pains to smooth O'Neill's path into the family. Uncle

Pemberton, who nowadays understood things very dimly, asked embarrassing questions about Holbroke — why he had not come that evening and so forth. He still had hopes that Holbroke would come to the aid of the Royale Apartments. So unless Holbroke dodged him, as he usually succeeded in doing, Uncle Pemberton discoursed to him of the potential fountain of gold contained in that proposition.

After dinner, O'Neill detained Allaine in the little room off the library, the scene, not many months before, of the little comedy of the mistletoe. Plainly Allaine remembered it, for as they entered, her eyes wandered furtively to the chandelier, and back again to O'Neill. He laughed softly and putting a compelling hand to her cheek, turned her about and kissed her, both deliberately and lingeringly.

"We'll dispense with the mistletoe this time," he said; and he was pleased to see the color rise till it disappeared under the loose locks on her forehead. But he gave no sign of his gratification. Instead, his manner changed to a brisk and business-like one. It was no part of his plan that Allaine should tire of his caresses. He made them short, but fervent. Where Holbroke had "mooned" at length, O'Neill refrained till Allaine wondered why — then put his love into a caress that was as devout as it was fleeting.

"Allaine," he began, "I'm going to have a talk with your brother to-night."

She nodded in an absent-minded way. Her thought was still with the Christmas incident.

"But first," he continued gravely, "I want to be sure of you."

She flashed a curious glance at him.

"Would you marry me," O'Neill asked, hardly above a whisper, "if it meant living quite moderately, you know — in a very modest way, with only a few friends, and not any too many pleasures, and not the least bit of splurge?" He went pale under his brick-tan, as he waited a long minute for her answer.

"Yes," Allaine said, deliberately, "I'm just fool enough to do that very thing." Her lips curled in self-contempt.

O'Neill drew a deep breath. "Of course," he assured her, "it wouldn't be quite so bad as that. Still you never know what's going to happen. It's well to be frank." His eyes invited her assent.

It is doubtful if she heard his last remark. "If anyone had told me six months ago that I would do this," she told him, with a tinge of indignation in her usually cool voice, "I would have laughed. But now I know just how it is that girls run off with the chauffeur — I'd marry you if you were the grocer's boy!" she finished in a tone of mingled discontent and sincerity.

O'Neill threw back his head and laughed, heartily — laughed till the tears came. "By Jove!" he exclaimed. "What rippin' compliments you give a fellow!"

Allaine laughed too. "I didn't mean it that way," she assured him, contritely. "You know I didn't!" She drew close to him and slipped her cool fingers into his hand.

It was the first caress she had ever given O'Neill. His heart leaped in response, but he only pressed her hand lightly, as one is still when a little wild thing of the woods approaches to make acquaintance. "Let's go to your

brother now," he suggested ; adding mischievously, " You might as well know the worst."

He turned to the wide door between the two rooms, and, as Allaine followed, he fancied he heard her sigh.

Willoughby was sitting at the far end of the room under the reading lamp, cutting the pages of a new magazine. He looked a little embarrassed as they approached. The aunts had begged him, tearfully, to remonstrate with his sister, and to show her that she had a duty to the family to marry as well as possible, particularly since the Van Haaven fortunes had waned. Now Willoughby, though very much in love himself, saw the good sense of this point of view, and, knowing Allaine's peculiarly cold temperament, was disposed to subscribe to the aunts' sentiments. He told himself that Allaine might as well marry one man as another, since she was evidently without the capacity to love. That she had accepted O'Neill, was the outcome of a whim. It would soon pass. He only regretted that O'Neill, who seemed a nice fellow, should be inconvenienced by a broken engagement and all it implied. He fancied that a plain statement of affairs from O'Neill as to his prospects — or the lack of them — would bring Allaine to her senses — would knock the engagement on the head, to put it brutally. So he laid down his magazine and looked at the two judicially, hoping O'Neill would make his statement and plea as short as possible. Willoughby had already determined what he should say in reply.

O'Neill drew up a chair for Allaine and seated himself on the arm of it with an air of being very much at ease. It made Willoughby regret what he had to do.

O'Neill began it. " You'll want to know something

about me, Mr. Van Haaven, before you let me have this little sister of yours."

Willoughby nodded somberly.

"I've tried to prepare her," O'Neill went on, with a little twinkle aside at Allaine, "for the exact brand of poverty and disgrace she would have to face if she married me. But she's such a rippin' good sport—" O'Neill choked over the words. Allaine's decision had meant much to him.

"Allaine doesn't understand," Willoughby interposed, dutifully. "She doesn't know what it means to be short of money." Into his mind came the memory of Allaine's bill with the modiste. He cast a slightly bitter glance at his sister. She shrugged her slim shoulders at him in response, quite well aware what he meant.

"I hope you won't mind what I say," Willoughby continued, apologetically. "The truth is, my aunts and Uncle Pemberton, too, when he was himself, had set their hearts on my sister's making a good match. She is not the girl—" he spoke as if Allaine were not present—"for a man in moderate circumstances. I say it as much for your sake as for hers," he added, in a friendly fashion. "I have always liked you, O'Neill."

Hicks smiled. "I'll do my best for Allaine," he said. "And by the way," he observed, rising, "I borrowed a book from the city library this afternoon. Perhaps you'd like to look at it." He went out into the hall, reappearing with a thick, unwieldy volume. "It looks like the family Bible," he commented, laying it on the table, "but it isn't."

After a moment's search, he handed it, open, to Willoughby, pointing to a paragraph in the middle of a page.

Willoughby adjusted the pair of owl spectacles to which he had lately been condemned by an oculist and began reading, hesitatingly, as a mere man might read a recipe for angel cake, with no particular comprehension of its meaning.

"The Viscount Castleton (John Richard Barrington O'Neill) of Ordhull, County Down; and Baron Balmain of Tyrone and Balmain, Ireland. Lieutenant Coldstream Guards; Town residence — 16 Belgrave Square, London. Clubs — Carlton; Travellers —"

Allaine sat bolt upright. Her eyes looked as if something were pushing them forward in their sockets. She drank in the words as her brother read them, both avidly and unbelievingly, with a strange sense of be-puzzlement, as if she were conscious of hearing incorrectly.

Willoughby paused. He turned the book over in his hands and looked at the title. It was Burke's "Peerage."

There was something like consternation in the glance he gave O'Neill. "Is this—" he tapped the book, agitatedly — "Is this — er — you?"

O'Neill nodded. He appeared to be suffocating with some inward emotion, but, like an Englishman, he suppressed it. In reality he was bursting with laughter! For many reasons the title meant little to him.

A great many things flashed upon Willoughby. He was a democrat in its broad sense, but he had a "feeling" for titles — as we have in this country, as a carefully trained person is thrall to curiosity for things deliberately put out of his life by his ancestors or forebears. He has no use for them, but he hankers for a closer approach to them. There is the charm of the forbidden about them. He is awed by them — drawn — fascinated — over-

whelmed. So this was a man of title who sat there so easily on the arm of his sister's chair! And he had dared to chide him for aspiring to Allaine—he had discountenanced the match—he had said—what hadn't he said! Willoughby felt himself getting warm. He felt he would like to take off his collar.

Allaine, womanlike, was the first to recover herself. She turned in her chair and looked straight at O'Neill. "Do you mean to say," she drawled, without allowing a particle of the gaucherie she felt to become apparent, "that I've been kissed by a real live viscount?"

O'Neill threw back his head and laughed his hearty big laugh. "Yes, you have," he said, "and here goes again!" He stooped and, suiting the action to the word, he kissed Allaine in a fervent fashion that made her undemonstrative brother stare.

Van Haaven laid down the book on the table beside him, carefully marking the place as if he were afraid it might vanish. He took off his glasses and laid them on the book. Then, very deliberately, he spoke. "Man to man," he said, with some embarrassment, "I don't know that I've said anything I shouldn't. But," he paused, "probably it wasn't the proper way to speak to a viscount." A faint tinge of a smile appeared on his face. He began to feel, dimly, that Bella would be amused at the occurrence, hence, though still slightly agitated, the exigencies of the moment lightened for him.

O'Neill was quick to sense his natural confusion. He sprang up and grabbed Willoughby's hand, pressing it warmly. "Man to man was right!" he assured him, heartily. "The bally title doesn't matter a rap!"

"Oh, but it does," Willoughby contradicted. "It

means everything to Aunt Harriet and Aunt Edwina—" he turned doubtfully to Allaine. He hardly knew, now, whether to include her. He wondered if she had not, perhaps, known the true state of affairs all along.

"No," she assured him, "it doesn't mean everything. I'd have married John anyway." With the instantaneous adjustment of the feminine make-up, she felt perfectly and joyously at home with the new situation. She looked radiant. It was the nearest thing to cake and penny too — though she did not put it that way to herself — that she had ever come across. The very rapture of it lifted up her cool nature — warmed her like a stone in the sun. Allaine was more human in this moment than she had been before in the whole course of her existence. Something woke in her that never quite went to sleep again. The woman began to evolve.

"Why didn't you tell us in the beginning?" she asked O'Neill, with some curiosity.

He settled himself more comfortably on the arm of her chair. "Well," he answered, reflectively, "all this stuff —" he leaned forward and touched the book with one sunburned finger — "has really very little to do with John O'Neill. And to tell the truth, it isn't nearly so fine as it sounds. In one way," he laughed a little to rob the words of possible offense, "we don't think such a lot about titles in England as you do here. We take them more for granted. They're part of the official life of the realm. They don't make a good fellow out of a cad, any more than the absence of them makes a rotter out of a first-class man. And I've been out of England so much that titles seem even a bit silly to me. I've met royal fellows all over the world — fit to be kings! And doing

the commonest work with no title ahead and none behind 'em. I vow they made me and my trumpery little stamp sing small." He looked warmly at Van Haaven.

The latter nodded in comprehension. At this moment he liked O'Neill better than any other man he had ever met.

"Out on your own plains," O'Neill went on, "where I spent my first year out of college, they have a magnificent idea of democracy. They take a fellow at par — no kow-towing to wealth or place. I wanted the woman I married — and I came here to America partly on that quest — to take me the same way. I like the American girl. She's rippin'—ideal! But I don't like the girl who's out for a show marriage, with the happy man as a mere incident. I never wanted to be that kind of incident, you know!" He laughed his big laugh again.

Willoughby smiled his slow smile. "I don't think you were ever intended to be an incident," he said, drily, but with flattering sincerity.

"Thanks so much!" the viscount murmured.

"By the way," Willoughby ventured, struck with a sudden light, "this is why you signed the telegram 'Castleton,' isn't it?"

"Yes," the other answered. "It was careless of me. It might have given the whole thing away. I had the best of reasons for keeping it secret." He looked at Allaine with a certain joyous confidence that made her drop her eyes in a feeling that was part shame. She, only, knew how her heart had wavered that first night of her engagement to O'Neill — how she had gone to sleep determining to cast out this strange, new, compelling emotion and to recall Holbroke the first thing in the morning.

She could never tell O'Neill how nearly she had failed him!

"Let me make a confession," the viscount began, with a twinkle, his eyes very blue in his sunburnt face. "Months ago, Holbroke and I knew that the report had gone the rounds, that one of us was — well — not what he seemed. (How the deuce anyone found it out, I'd really like to know!) But they picked out the wrong one — Holbroke. So I persuaded him to let it go at that. And as a matter of fact, he'd have masqueraded as the King of England, if it would have softened my lady's heart to him!" O'Neill nodded toward Allaine.

Allaine leaned toward him, interestedly. "But how could that have helped him, John? I'd have had to know sooner or later."

O'Neill sighed and shook his head. "Holbroke thought that once he had the right to make love to you, my dear, you would see so deep into his heart that you could never turn your eyes away. He has always kept aloof from the lure of the feminine. He doesn't understand women very well. He has always been a student — of books. I never saw him lose his head over any girl before, poor chap!" The moisture came into Hicks' blue eyes.

"Sorry, I'm sure," Allaine said, carelessly, holding his ring up to the light till a mysterious "C" showed plain in the antique gold of the heraldic device.

"What! you sorry?" the viscount exclaimed, ironically. "You're not likely to lose any sleep over anyone's disappointment, my dear — not if I know you!" he added, with that good-humored frankness which was far removed from rudeness in him.

Allaine flushed. Her chin tilted ever so little. She opened her lips to an indignant denial — thought better of it, and was silent. It was borne in upon her that it was true. And the knowledge did not please her.

"So that was the joke I didn't see!" Willoughby broke in. He was remembering Bella's evasion of his remark about the telegram and her suppressed amusement. He was relieved to know in the light of these revelations that he had not been unduly stupid. "Bella told me it was a nickname of yours," he explained, in answer to O'Neill's puzzled look.

The viscount laughed his big laugh. "Bella stuck it out like a little brick!" he said, warmly. "Only, once she wrote and asked how much longer the secret had to be kept — it's rather trying to be always on one's guard. And by Jove!" he added, "I think she had some special reason of her own —" he stopped, fearful of betraying a possible secret. And even he, who knew Bella so well, was far from guessing that she looked to a hint of the real state of affairs to smooth Willoughby's path at home after the news of his engagement had been announced there.

"Tell me," said O'Neill, after a moment, "how did you know about this dark secret, anyway?"

"It was through a letter —" Willoughby began.

"Can't understand that," the viscount objected, "for all my mail came plain 'Mr. O'Neill.'"

"It was the inside of a letter, I believe," Willoughby resumed. "Wasn't it, Allaine?"

She nodded. "A letter that began, 'My dear Viscount.'"

O'Neill frowned prodigiously, trying to remember.

"You and Holbrooke were reading it on the street,"

Willoughby added, recalling what Cyril had told him.

"Still I don't see," O'Neill declared, "why they tagged Holbroke with the title, when it was my letter."

"Mr. Holbroke was reading it," Allaine put in. "It was he who tore it up and threw it away, and someone picked it up and spread the news all over town. Olmsby was too innocent," she added, a trifle contemptuously, "to realize that friends sometimes read each other's letters — Besides —"

"Besides what?" the viscount interrogated her.

But Allaine shook her head and refused to enlighten him. It would have sounded extremely rude to say that all the town — including Allaine herself — had considered that Holbroke looked the part of the titled man, and that his democratic friend, well-liked though he was, seemed more of the common clay.

Perhaps O'Neill had some inkling of what lay behind that unfinished sentence, for he looked at the young girl as if something amusing had occurred to him.

And in the short silence that ensued, it struck Allaine for the first time what Holbroke's words had meant — "I am not what you think." And she — she had thought they presaged the revelation of his title! Her lip curled. What she had escaped!

Curious as Allaine was to hear of O'Neill's possessions, his titles, his country and town houses, and all the pomp and circumstance she was to share with him, he seemed to steer clear of the discussion of it. The talk turned on anything and everything else. Willoughby had a shrewd suspicion that O'Neill purposely guided the conversation away from a subject that manifestly irked him. And he liked him all the better for it. When the viscount left,

the two men shook hands, very heartily. It is doubtful if they had ever liked each other so well before.

As for Allaine, she lay awake a long while, reveling in the golden prospect which was hers. The joy of a child in a holiday from school, the eagerness of a traveler venturing into new fields, the bliss of a prisoner standing free under the sky — all this was in the waking dream that wrapped her, as she lay hour after hour smiling into the dark.

CHAPTER XXV

Aunt Edwina tapped softly on the door of her niece's bedroom. Allaine slept late.

There was no response to her knock. She opened the door gently.

Allaine lay at ease, her arms above her head, one long dark braid over her shoulder. Her eyes were closed. But as Aunt Edwina entered, she woke fully, smiling, as if something very pleasant had occurred to her.

"Well?" she asked lazily.

The aunt seated herself primly on a chair near the bed. "Willoughby," she began, "has told me of the enormous bill you ran up for clothes. It just occurred to me that if you marry Mr. O'Neill, you will have to dress very plainly indeed — like a shop girl, in fact."

Allaine turned her head on the pillow, hiding her smile.

Aunt Edwina's sharp eyes scanned her keenly. "I wonder," she went on, "if you have considered this side of the case."

Allaine suppressed a giggle in the bed clothes. She was enjoying herself hugely.

Aunt Edwina hearing the faint smothered sound fancied — nay, hoped — that Allaine was already beginning to repent — was possibly in tears. She went on more kindly. "Your Aunt Harriet and I blame ourselves in this matter. We have not been careful enough of your associates. If the family finances had only been

as usual, you would have been a débutante in the proper society. And that school you insisted on going to—in spite of the objections of your Aunt Harriet and myself—was the last one we should have sent you to," she finished, tacking on the preposition in the handiest place.

"Of course it was the last one," Allaine drawled, teasingly. "Rose Hall was a finishing school. I didn't need any more."

"You met that very unpleasant Miss Vanning there. She looked like a chorus girl—" Aunt Edwina went on, not noticing the interruption.

"Oh, Aunt Edwina!" Allaine exclaimed. "She was awfully wealthy, and she had the most gorgeous clothes!"

"Well, clothes aren't everything," Aunt Edwina began—and stopped.

Her niece snickered, faintly.

"That is," the older woman corrected herself, remembering her first line of argument, "they are really very important, and you will have absolutely nothing to wear if you marry Mr. O'Neill. And, by the way, what a very vulgar name O'Neill is! How you can think of giving up a name like Van Haaven and taking up with O'Neill, I cannot understand."

Allaine yawned. "Can't you really?" she asked incredulously. She reached out to the tiny table that stood beside the bed and took therefrom a thick and unwieldy book. O'Neill had left it for her perusal. Turning the pages, she found a certain paragraph and handed the book to Aunt Edwina. "This will help you to understand why I don't mind changing my name for—" she paused deliberately, then added—"John's."

Aunt Edwina accepted the book and laid it down on her lap while she took her glasses off the little hook on the bosom of her dress and put them astride of her nose with every overt symptom of patience-in-the-face-of-extreme-provocation. "I don't see what this has to do with you, Allaine," she remarked.

Her niece made no reply. But her eyes rested on her aunt with an expression of peculiar and malicious pleasure.

Aunt Edwina had read but a few words, when her glasses fell off. She adjusted them and proceeded. Again they fell off — it was a trick they had when she particularly wanted to see anything clearly. This time she put them on a trifle impatiently, lost the place — found it again with ill-concealed eagerness — read on a little way — looked at the title of the book, and read on.

Presently she looked up. "They — they exchanged names, then," she remarked with her peculiar faculty for getting things upside down. "I mean Mr. Holbroke —" She read a few words more — avidly — as if she were eating something ravishingly agreeable.

"I always knew," she observed, triumphantly, "that Mr. Holbroke was somebody, even before Cyril told us. He looks it."

This time Allaine laughed outright.

"Mr. Holbroke — I mean Mr. O'Neill —" Her glasses dropped into her lap. She turned a puzzled gaze on her niece. "I wish you'd explain all this to me, Allaine. What relation is this —" she tapped the paragraph — "to the — the man you're going to marry?"

"It's perfectly plain, Aunt Edwina —" Allaine sat up straight in bed. Her cheeks were a bright pink, her eyes

sparkling. It was the first time she had made the statement aloud in broad daylight. It was a thrilling experience. "Mr. O'Neill is the viscount Castleton and Baron of Balmain. You can read it there for yourself. He showed it to us last night and told us all about himself."

"Oh!" Aunt Edwina ejaculated, helplessly. "Oh!—" Vaguely there drifted into the whirl of her thoughts, the numberless slights, the innuendoes, the belittling remarks, she had let fall toward "Mr." O'Neill — the Irishman who had seemed of so small consequence. How could she have guessed that such an undignified, sociable, ordinary man should turn out to be anybody in particular? Her ideas about the nobility were all wrong! She felt bewildered — as if someone had suddenly pulled her chair from under her.

She rose waveringly, the book under her arm, her glasses dangling. "I must go to your Aunt Harriet," she said, huskily. "She must be told at once."

She had some trouble opening and closing the door. Her hands were trembling with excitement.

Aunt Harriet sat in her own room. She was wrapped to the neck in Turkish toweling. Her hair was being shampooed and blued. A hardfaced woman stood over her and ministered to her locks in a business-like way.

"Harriet!" Aunt Edwina gasped. "I have some extraordinary news!"

"It must wait," Harriet declared, firmly. "I can't attend to two things at once. Besides, I couldn't hear a word — with all this rubbing."

Edwina sank into a chair. She waited tremulously till the operation should come to an end. One finger she

kept in the place in the big book. Her thoughts still whirled.

Harriet's shampoo seemed endless. But after what appeared to Edwina an eternity, the woman unpinned the enveloping towels and, gathering up her paraphernalia, departed.

Aunt Harriet rose stiffly and went to the glass. Her hair was resplendent, but her face was moist and shining. She applied a powder-puff with a vigor that made a tiny cloud about her as she stood. "Now what is the news?" she asked, graciously, stroking the powder off her black eyebrows.

"It's about Mr. O'Neill," Edwina said. "Read this." She came and laid the book on the bureau, open at the proper place. Aunt Harriet groped for her glasses.

Edwina stood by to note the effect.

Aunt Harriet read the whole paragraph through. Then she began at the beginning and read it through again, her lips pursed up, her black brows frowning a trifle. She looked up at Edwina and closed the book.

"Well?" asked Edwina, breathlessly.

"I don't believe it," announced her sister, coolly.

Aunt Edwina gasped. "*You — don't — believe it!*" she echoed. "Why there it is in black and white."

Harriet smiled indulgently. "Yes, but it doesn't prove that it's the man we know as Mr. O'Neill. There are any number of O'Neills. It is a very common name indeed. We once had a gardener whose name was O'Neill."

"Oh!" ejaculated Aunt Edwina. Her head stopped whirling for the moment. She had to admit to herself that Harriet was extremely astute. Why hadn't this view occurred to her?

Aunt Harriet brushed the powder off the front of her dress. "I leave it to you, Edwina," she said, kindly, touched by her sister's blank expression, "does Mr. O'Neill look to you like a nobleman? Would a nobleman go round making friends with everybody the way he does?"

Miss Edwina sighed. "Allaine will be so disappointed," she said, simply, saying nothing of the feeling in her own consciousness that suddenly made everything as flat as new cider.

"Very likely," Aunt Harriet agreed, drily. Allaine had been most unpleasant to her within the week. She had not forgotten.

They talked the affair over from many points. Edwina admitted that she had been "easily taken in," as Harriet phrased it. It made them feel rather superior that Harriet had seen right through the matter, when Allaine had been deceived. Young people were so sure they were right!

Harriet determined to break the news to her niece. It would, she opined, be a kind thing to tell her at once. And she was not without an ill-defined satisfaction at being the one to enlighten the young girl.

But by the time the two finished their conversation, Allaine had gone to town, in answer to a phone message — from O'Neill probably, Aunt Edwina surmised, to buy the engagement ring.

Evening came. Allaine arrived home with Wiloughby. O'Neill, with a certain delicacy, had refused an invitation to dinner. He fancied the family would like to talk over affairs without restraint.

Allaine came downstairs looking so tremendously hand-

some that even her brother noticed and stared. Her cheeks were wild roses for color, and her lips smiled.

She wore no jewelry except the new engagement ring, a magnificent star sapphire set in exquisitely carved gold. It looked too heavy for her slim hand. But quite evidently Allaine did not consider it a burden.

At the table they talked fitfully, waiting the moment when Segby should absent himself from the room. He must have sniffed news, for he lingered interminably. At last, however, he disappeared, so slowly, that one imagined him dissolving, a leg or an arm at a time—as the Cheshire Cat was wont to melt into air.

Aunt Harriet began it. "Where have you been all day, Allaine?" she asked, severely.

Allaine smiled provokingly. "Would you really like to know?" she inquired.

"That was my intention," Aunt Harriet responded, her black brows arching themselves with offended dignity. "I never ask idle questions."

Allaine buttered a bit of bread, carefully and elaborately, before she troubled to answer. "I went to town with John to buy our engagement ring. Wouldn't you like to see it?" She drew the ring from her finger as she spoke and handed it across the table to her aunt.

The corners of Aunt Harriet's mouth drew down in disapproval. She took the ring as gingerly as if it had been red hot. She was convinced that the ring was as much an imitation of the real thing, as the Irishman's pretensions to a title. Without a word, she passed it to Edwina. The latter exclaimed over its beauty. After a moment she handed it to Willoughby, reaching across

Uncle Pemberton, who no longer seemed to take an interest in such trifles as rings, even engagement rings.

"Whew!" Willoughby ejaculated. "What a beauty!" He turned to Aunt Harriet. "By the way," he began, "I want to have a little conversation with the family after dinner."

Aunt Harriet bobbed her head with energy. "Yes, and I want to have a little talk with *you*, Willoughby, as the head of the family," she smiled, grimly and significantly, at Edwina, "about your sister's engagement, of which I do not approve."

"By the way," Willoughby said, "at Lord Castleton's insistence, I've been looking up his credentials—" He turned to Allaine. "You've told them, of course," he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, negligently. "I showed Aunt Edwina the Burke's book. That seemed to be pretty plain."

"Plain enough," Aunt Harriet sniffed, "for those who believe everything that is told them."

(The door between the dining-room and pantry wavered slightly, as if in a draught. Segby's hearing was not so acute as it had been. Formerly a closed door had been no particular barrier to enlightenment.)

Willoughby looked annoyed. Aunt Harriet was evidently on the warpath. He disliked very much the task of smoothing her down — of persuading her to rinse off her warpaint and abandon her snake dance, so to speak. "My dear Aunt," he began, patiently, "I have taken every possible means, to-day, of proving the viscount's statements. They are perfectly correct."

"Who says so?" Aunt Harriet flung the question at him, her black brows lifting themselves with disbelief.

"The viscount's New York bankers, the British Consul, our own great financier, Mr. Lounsbury—I went with him personally to interview them."

"Do they say that Mr. O'Neill is a viscount?" Aunt Harriet demanded.

"Yes," Willoughby answered.

"Well," the old lady retorted, obstinately, "he isn't *my* idea of a viscount!"

"Oh, don't say that," Aunt Edwina interrupted, pacifically. "He has very nice manners."

"So has Segby!" sniffed Aunt Harriet.

(The door waved in an agitated fashion.)

"Can't we have the next course?" Willoughby asked; his eye on the door.

"It would be an agreeable change," Allaine murmured. She had taken no part in the discussion — she thought family wrangles awfully undignified, and the happiness of the day had had a soporific effect. Nothing ruffled her — besides, what did Aunt Harriet know about viscounts, anyway?

Segby glided round the table with the air of a priest at an altar. In the light of what he had just overheard, the Van Haavens began once more to assume importance. When Allaine helped herself from the dish on his arm, his greedy eyes spent themselves on her ring. It meant, not beauty, but money, to him.

Again the family talked of the weather and all the little nothings that serve to veil either absolute vacuity, or a serious issue.

As soon as Segby left the room, Aunt Harriet resumed

the offensive. But Willoughby enjoined on her the advisability of waiting till they were in a more secluded place and backed up his advice with a warning look at the door.

Reluctantly, she resigned herself to the situation, but an eloquent glance at Edwina proclaimed her views quite unchanged — in fact, unchangeable!

At the subsequent conclave she bickered, until Willoughby rose in his might and settled her with a resolute reading of the paragraph in Burke's "Peerage" and a short but vigorous statement of his proofs, to which, so far, she had been too indignant to listen.

Her jaw dropped. An expression of stupefaction came into her face. Like Edwina, she thought a great many things, not all of them pleasant. One was the memory of how she had swept past the young Irishman in the hall a few nights before, hardly noticing his greeting, as if he were the veriest nobody. And now he was a viscount — and, yes, a baron! And he had been all the time, and she hadn't guessed it! It was very humiliating.

But she made the best of her way out of the blunder, and congratulated Allaine, graciously, on the exceptional match she was about to make. And she explained her hostility to the viscount on the ground that as Allaine's oldest relative, who had practically brought her up, she had to be particular and not take things for granted. And she added that her niece should be very grateful that she had people who looked thoroughly into such matters before they gave their approval. In the end Aunt Harriet had almost made herself believe that she herself had personally investigated Lord Castleton's claims.

That night, she went in and sat on the side of Miss

Edwina's bed and talked the whole thing over, getting, for the first time, a glow of satisfied ambition out of the prospect. Everyone who had ever spoken unkindly of her from youth to age was hauled from the depths of the past and made to witness the triumph of her niece — her own youngest brother's child — marrying a nobleman!

"Allaine has an unfortunate disposition," Aunt Harriet observed, "but she is an exceedingly beautiful girl. She will grace any man's house."

"Yes, I quite agree with you, Harriet," said Miss Edwina. She raised herself on one elbow. "What are you going to give her as a wedding present?" she asked, eagerly.

Aunt Harriet considered. "My diamond pendant, I guess," she answered, more than a trifle reluctantly. "The gifts will be reported in the paper. Though poor Raymond has been dead so long, the marriage of his only daughter must attract some notice. A diamond pendant sounds well, don't you think so?"

"Decidedly," Aunt Edwina responded. "We'll have to open up the house for the wedding, I suppose."

"Oh, no," Aunt Harriet declared. "She must be married at Old Trinity — it's such a modish church!"

And, having arranged this and a thousand other details to their satisfaction, they put out the lights and retired with clear consciences.

CHAPTER XXVI

The events of life are singularly uncontinuous. No one circumstance glides along to a proper ending before the next begins. When it appears to be rounding out to a logical conclusion, along comes another quite unrelated event and shoulders number one out of the way, to occupy the limelight itself.

Thus, while Allaine's engagement (which at the viscount's request was to be a short one) was ripening to the wedding day, the Morisses came back from abroad. They at once got into communication with Mrs. Mac-Fallon, and for the next week or two, Allaine's affairs were thrust into the background.

All that devolved on Bella at this juncture was a god-send to her. She felt extremely unhappy over O'Neill's marriage. It was true, he walked deliberately, with wide-open eyes. But the chances against his happiness were so great, that Bella could scarcely reconcile herself to the marriage.

She met the Morisses at the dock, and went at once with them to their hotel to talk matters over. The old lady was tremulous with eagerness to begin the memorial to their beloved daughter. And Mr. Moriss, himself, was no less anxious. Bella made arrangements for them to meet Willoughby the very next morning and go to the Royale together.

This was by far the most important event in the Van

Haaven fortunes that had occurred for a long while. For the moment, Allaine's prospects paled in comparison. And it was all dependent on the point of view of two old folks. The Van Haaven fortunes hung on a whim!

Bella took the early train to town with Willoughby. They motored to the hotel, picked up Mr. and Mrs. Moriss and proceeded to the Kempton-Royale.

It was an imposing pile. From Mrs. Moriss's expression it was plain that the first glimpse of it impressed her. Though, of course, the building was dingy with city dust and looked as lonely, even on that busy street, as a lost dog. Willoughby alighted and, taking the keys out of his pocket, led the way to the main hall, swung the great doors open and ushered the party in.

The chill of the winter still lingered inside, though the day was warm — uncomfortably so. The generous dimensions of the hall reminded Mrs. Moriss of some of the old mansions in England, through which one might drive a coach and pair, without taxing the width. It was large enough, she told her husband in a pleased flutter, for social affairs — teas, meetings, lectures for the girls.

He nodded, looking about him at the dark panelling, the great fireplace, the air of dignity that spoke in all the simple but rich adornment. Van Haaven, watching him closely, could not guess whether he were pleased or not.

The glass doors at the far end gave to the court in the center. Willoughby opened them and passed out. The party followed him into the warm sunshine. Uncle Pemberton had planned well. He had laid out the big square court into a semi-formal garden. At this season the rose bushes were bending with bloom. The fragrance came

in lovely whiffs to the threshold of the hall. The dry fountain in the middle of the court held rain from the last shower. A flock of city sparrows perched on the rim and flew about, drinking and bathing.

Mrs. Moriss clapped her hands like a little girl. "Oh, I love it already!" she exclaimed to her husband. Her cheeks were pink with excitement. Her dream castle was hardening to solid stone under her very eyes! She wandered about in the box-bordered paths — neglected though they were, and sadly in need of trimming, as if they were the very road to Paradise and her own lost daughter. She lingered delightedly over the sun dial in the court. It was inscribed quaintly :

I measure my hours by shadow
Mayest thou measure thine
By sunshine.

Meanwhile her husband discussed the more prosaic side of things. "She likes it," he observed to Willoughby, nodding towards his wife. "That is, after all, the main consideration. But I must have my architect come and see how the property will lend itself to remodeling. There, at the back end, facing that quiet street, we would have the gymnasium. We might have to tear down that whole wing — I don't know. That and the lecture hall would be the only public part. The rest would be little family groups — even the kitchens and dining-rooms would be perfectly private — each group with its own. I want, that is *we* want — no flavor of the institution about this."

Willoughby nodded. "Would you like to go through some of the apartments?"

"No hurry," Mr. Moriss said easily. "Wait till she gets done looking at the gardens."

They sat down on one of the stone benches and talked of the new plan. Van Haaven found himself getting more and more interested in it. It was so unlike other philanthropies. There was love — personal love — in it. His eyes followed Bella and the little old lady as they fluttered around the garden. The two were perfectly happy, as women will be discussing the possibilities of a new house, big or little. He chanced to recall that Uncle Pemberton's architect had advised plenty of closet room and special trunk storage. He rather fancied that if the scales hung even, this provision would turn the balance if Mrs. Moriss had anything to do with it.

And so it proved. When the two women had exhausted the treasures of the big court, they walked slowly toward the two on the bench, talking earnestly as they came.

The subsequent voyage of discovery through the apartments — just the right size for the family groups — ended gloriously in such closets as one never dreams of in mere apartments. The die was cast. Before they left the place the deal was almost as good as closed. Mrs. Moriss was radiant, and her husband hardly less so.

"How glad Uncle Pemberton will be!" Van Haaven remarked to Bella as they drove to the train. "At last his beloved apartments will be used, and by much more appreciative people than would have occupied them had his first plan succeeded."

But Uncle Pemberton was not pleased. He was distinctly otherwise. "What!" he croaked, almost speechless with indignation. "Have a lot of mill girls and shop hands in my beautiful apartments! I'll never consent to

it — never!" He stumped up and down the room, indignantly.

"But my dear uncle," Willoughby urged, following him pacifically, "if we don't sell it to Mr. Moriss, we must let the property go to someone who may do worse to it. Then we would get about half of what Moriss will give. And think," he added, "what pleasure it will give to those poor girls who have never known anything decent!"

"I don't want slum people in my apartments," Uncle Pemberton raged. "I built them for the best people. Let those girls go down to the East Side where they belong."

Willoughby checked the retort that sprang to his lips. After all, Uncle Pemberton was an invalid — not responsible for what he said. No doubt he would come around after he once got used to the idea. Meanwhile, as Willoughby had been invested with full power of attorney in the crisis, Uncle Pemberton was helpless. And properly so. His mental capacity grew less and less. He did not always understand what was said to him. The news of Allaine's matrimonial triumph, which would have meant so much to him even a year ago, passed in at one dull ear and out at the other. That he showed so hot an interest in the present matter, was a sign to Willoughby that his mind had been set on the Kempton-Royale so long that it had narrowed down to that and that only.

Willoughby left his uncle sitting, glowering and muttering to himself. He was sorry he had mentioned the subject to the old gentleman. And he planned to take the invalid on a trip somewhere — Palm Beach or Bermuda — when the property was finally disposed of, so as

to divert his mind and improve his health. They had really not been able to give him all the care he needed at this crisis in his life. He sighed as he left the room. He was fond of his uncle, more so than of any of the rest of the family.

He met Allaine and the viscount in the lower hall on their way to a twilight spin in a rather weather-beaten machine — the best the village afforded. He asked after Holbroke. It had been a long time since he had seen him.

"He's on a fishing trip up in Canada," the viscount replied, and Willoughby thought he detected a shade of real regret in the tone. It was too bad that women always came between men in this way. And Allaine, Willoughby reflected with brotherly candor, was hardly worth the sacrifice.

After the first embarrassment of addressing the nobleman had subsided under O'Neill's tactful management, Willoughby felt perfectly at his ease with him. He had always liked the young man. Now, he told himself, he liked him none the less — which was a democratic way of putting it!

But with the rest of the household, it was altogether different. The two aunts, who had been so distant with O'Neill, were cordiality itself with the viscount. Van Haaven found himself gritting his teeth sometimes to see how they "fell over themselves," as he termed it, to honor this man whom they had so despised. With the suddenness of a miracle, the viscount's manner was "charming"; his features "most aristocratic"; his whole personality "beyond reproach." Aunt Edwina had even been heard to say that she thought his behavior to "the

common people " delightful — fascinating ! All that was once unbearable about this very simple young man, now became the stamp of nobility.

As for Segby, his obsequious back bent to the viscount till it developed a crick. It pained him at night, till he had recourse to a plaster.

One day Aunt Harriet had made some super-gracious allusion to the title.

The viscount looked up with a laugh. " Oh," he said, " I wouldn't have had the title at all, had it not been for the rule of male descent. I am of the younger branch of the family."

Aunt Harriet looked interested. " Who would have had it, then ? " she asked, thirstily.

" Old Lord Castleton's only daughter would have been Lady Castleton, as her mother was," he answered. " My cousin — the Hon. Miss O'Neill — otherwise, Mrs. Mac-Fallon." He glanced at the circle about him — the two aunts leaning toward him in a breathless curiosity — Allaine cool, yet eager. His sunburnt face held the faintest trace of a smile. He had waited for some time for them to ask this question. He had had glimpses of what Bella bore from her prospective in-laws !

" Oh ! " exclaimed both aunts in a breath. It sounded exactly as if a bee had stung them.

Allaine said nothing. But she caught her breath, sharply.

There was a moment of intense and embarrassed silence. It held bitter regret for each one of the three. Perhaps also a lesson.

Then the conversation turned to other things. The next day the two aunts drove to the village and made a

special call on Mrs. MacFallon, bearing a bunch of roses as a peace offering.

Bella's eyes opened wide with surprise when their cards were brought up to her. She made a very good guess as to this sudden change of front; and the two old ladies faced an extremely mischievous twinkle as they rose from their seats to greet her.

"This is very good of you," she said kindly. She saw shame in their demeanor, in their embarrassed eyes, in the flush that overspread their countenances. Her twinkle died. Her one thought was to reassure them — to set them at their ease.

Miss Edwina presented the roses, murmuring, inarticulately, something pleasant.

Bella received the gift with obvious friendliness. And as to the little fluttering apologies the old ladies made for not having called after Willoughby had told them of his engagement to her, Bella went more than half-way to meet them and even to help out with the excuses.

"Of course, we all know," she said, graciously, "how worried you have been about your brother's health and his business reverses. Little things like formal calls had to take second place."

"Yes, yes," Miss Harriet agreed, in a relieved tone, "exactly so. And beside that," she went on, "we have been out of the social routine for so long — ever since the death of our youngest brother Raymond. We took his two children after their mother died and brought them up, and, somehow, we got out of the way of going out, and drifted away from our social connections." She stopped for breath.

Bella nodded, sympathetically.

"And losing our money," Aunt Edwina interrupted, "just when Allaine was ready to make her *début*, too!"

"Yes," Aunt Harriet resumed, "she has never been launched in proper society. But now that she is about to marry so — so very —" She hesitated for the word — "advantageously, we will probably be drawn into social life more." She finished with acute satisfaction.

Bella sighed before she thought. This marriage was a real grief to her, as it was real happiness to them. She could not bear to talk about it with them. She tactfully changed the subject, hoping they would not notice.

But when they took their leave it was with the distinct impression that Mrs. MacFallon was far from feeling honored by the match her cousin Lord Castleton was consummating. It was a novel sensation. A perfectly new point of view for two obstinate ladies who had been brought up thrall to the pleasing idea that their family was the social salt of the universe.

For the very first time in their lives it dimly occurred to them how it must feel to be somebody's poor relations. But that their mistake in Bella should make them even a trifle more democratic was too much to hope. It merely constrained them to be more cautious. They talked as blatantly as ever about "family" and "good birth" and "social connections" and the "common people" — *but* — not before either Mrs. MacFallon or the viscount!

As for Willoughby, he learned of Bella's illustrious antecedents by the merest accident, one night at dinner. Aunt Harriet had remarked that it seemed strange that Mrs. MacFallon and the viscount were such good friends, in spite of his taking the title away from her.

Willoughby paused, his fork halfway to his mouth,

asked a few questions, was volubly answered by Miss Edwina and Miss Harriet in antiphony. What he was told seemed not visibly to disturb him. He finished his dinner in what looked to his aunts' observant gaze, the utmost unconcern. In talking it over afterward, they came to the conclusion that their nephew had known all along that Mrs. MacFallon was Lord Castleton's only daughter.

But this conjecture was far from the truth. It mattered little to Willoughby that the woman he loved was, in the eyes of the world, a great lady — she could be no greater than he had always thought her! Indeed, it is highly probable that had someone told him Bella was queen of a rich and mighty realm, he would have made answer —“What! Only a queen?”

Meanwhile the Kempton Block deal progressed toward completion. Willoughby found the genial, somewhat chatty Mr. Moriss, a just man, and a generous one. Already the feminine portion of the Van Haaven family began to talk about moving back to town. They planned to re-open the house for Allaine's wedding reception, in the early fall. Preparations for the trousseau were under way. They might have been fitly represented by a train of camels passing through the desert bearing loads of treasure. The young girl had a tolerably clear notion of what she wanted. It was not limited as to expense. Even Aunt Edwina, whose ideas were ambitious, was aghast at her niece's rampant lavishness in the matter of clothes!

To Allaine's future husband she appeared at this juncture a charming, naïve child. Her good fortune had softened and improved her. She was not so ready with her

drawling insolence as formerly. She was more natural — not so faddish and artificial. And O'Neill noticed with rapture certain signs of a deeper tenderness in her fleeting half-shy caresses. He felt justified of his faith in her real nature and its ultimate development. And he greeted her waking with all the joy of Pygmalion before his marble woman.

It was the day after the transfer of the Royale Apartments had been definitely agreed upon. Mr. and Mrs. Moriss had arranged a dinner at the Ritz-Carlton for that evening. All the Van Haavens were invited. All were going, even Uncle Pemberton. He had taken the news of the final passing of the property out of his hands more quietly than Willoughby had expected. Only a grim word or two escaped him. He was evidently trying to be on his good behavior.

The whole family were to take the limousine ordered from town, and, joyously, as to a picnic, proceed to the scene of the festivities. Bella, with O'Neill, had arrived early from the village. They sat in the cool of the library which was linen-shrouded, its pictures veiled in filmy white stuff.

Bella had the — is it a knack, or something inherent in some women's nature? — of overshadowing completely whatever she wore. She was in dinner dress, and O'Neill noted with pleasure the smooth ivory of her shoulders and the firm lines of her neck and throat. But beyond the fact that she looked extremely well and handsome, he could not have told to save his life — which was precious to him at this moment — what she had on.

They waited only a few minutes before Allaine drifted into the room. The viscount rose to meet her, his face

alight with eagerness. She was dressed in a misty frock of the blue that hovers in such places as the Blue Grotto at Capri. And she looked, somehow, cool, evanescent, unattainable.

It took more than a mere frock to keep the viscount at a distance. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

She flushed and glanced with some embarrassment at Bella. But she let O'Neill keep her hand in his as they crossed the wide room.

Bella rose and met her half way. "How charming you look!" she cried.

Allaine responded politely. She had always been cool with Bella, supposing her to be of common clay. Pride kept her from being different, now that she knew to the contrary. Bella hardly blamed the young girl. The sudden change in the manner of the two aunts, though gratifying, had its laughable side. It put them in anything but a dignified light. At least Allaine showed caliber. Bella thought no less of her for her continued coldness. Once or twice she fancied the girl was softening toward her. She did her best to encourage the change. Whatever happened, she must be friends with Hicks' wife. Any other attitude was unthinkable.

As they sat waiting for the others, Willoughby came down. He felt light-hearted — happier than he had been for months. Everything they had dreamed seemed to be coming true at once. A feeling of festival was in the air. It was so unusual for the whole family to be going out together, that the affair partook of the joyous nature of a wedding or other family rejoicing. Willoughby stood beside Bella's chair talking over Mrs. Moriss's plan that

Bella should start the organization of the great philanthropy — pick out the people who would be the best to take charge — arrange a good running program — vitalize the whole scheme, till it ran smoothly. This Bella was only too glad to promise. She was already tremendously interested.

Lord Castleton sat on the edge of a table near his beloved. He seemed by all appearance to be deep in a desperate flirtation with her. She was not inactive in the matter. They made a delightful picture.

Presently, the two aunts came down, Aunt Harriet in pale gray, Aunt Edwina in a subtle shade of mauve. They sank down on the nearest couch, rather warm from the exertion of an intricate toilet, and began to draw on their gloves. Edwina was décolleté, and, as she was plump, it was not unbecoming.

Aunt Harriet, however, was dressed to the ear lobes. And if her Venetian lace collar was an instrument of torture on that hot evening, no one guessed it by her expression, which was one of dignified enjoyment. She bore her anguish as imperturbably as an Indian brave, though she undoubtedly would have been offended at the comparison had any one mentioned it to her.

There was a whirl of dust at the carriage gate. The luxurious car rolled in and stopped under the porte-cochère. Miss Edwina took a peep at it through the lace at the window. She felt herself a connoisseur in cars. "Very nice indeed!" she murmured to herself.

"Here's the car," she announced to the room at large.
"Are we all ready?"

Willoughby looked about him. "All but Uncle Pem-

berton," he answered. "I'll run up and hurry him a little." He left the room. They heard him whistling as he ascended the stairs.

The viscount picked up Allaine's evening cloak and held it open for her to slip into.

A sharp sound came from upstairs — like the bursting of a tire! The jar of a scuffle in the upper hall — another sharp sound. They all knew it for a pistol shot!

O'Neill sprang for the stairs, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXVII

Uncle Pemberton lay on the floor of the upper hall. A revolver beside him sent up a tiny wisp of bluish smoke. Willoughby on his knees was frantically unfastening his uncle's collar. His shirt was smeared with the blood that gushed slowly from Pemberton's breast. Horror was in his face.

O'Neill bent over him.

"Help me lift him!" Willoughby choked.

The viscount shook his head. "Better not," he said.
"Let me get a pillow. We'll lay him down here."

He pushed open the door of the nearest bedroom. It was Allaine's. Even in the excitement of the moment he felt the charm of it — the feminine tangle of things in a room just dressed in — the indefinite perfume — the virginal atmosphere. He snatched a pillow off the blue-draped bed and dashed out into the hall.

Segby hovered on the top step, gazing with popping eyes and dropped jaw at the man on the floor.

"Get out of this!" the viscount commanded. "Phone for the doctor. Tell him to come at once! Better still, take the car that stands outside and bring him back with you." He knelt down and gently slipped the pillow under Uncle Pemberton's head. Willoughby had managed to loosen his uncle's clothes. There was a wound in the upper chest, from which the blood was oozing, with an oc-

casional gush, as the old man gasped for breath. Willoughby was trying to staunch it with his handkerchief.

"Can I help?" Bella's voice came to them from the top of the stairs. She stood there, white-faced, but calm.

"Yes," Willoughby replied. "Keep the rest away — tell them anything you like — an accident — anything."

She turned and went quietly downstairs.

The eyes of the two men met in a glance of pride. There were few women who, at a moment like this, would have been so self-controlled and helpful.

It seemed an eternity till the doctor came.

He made a hasty examination. "You did well not to move him," he observed. Then, answering their silent inquiry, "He will die," he whispered.

He made the wounded man as comfortable as possible then, having contrived a stretcher out of a shutter, the three slid him carefully to it and carried him to his bed.

Pemberton seemed quite conscious, though he would not speak to them. His face was ghastly, but perfectly composed.

It was the doctor who broached the subject of a clergyman for the dying man. Pemberton overheard them talking about it. He shook his head weakly. The doctor bent over him, his kindly countenance full of concern, for he was, unlike many physicians, a religious man.

"Christ is with the dying," he said, gently, "as he is with the living. Trust him. He will save you."

An expression of lofty contempt swept over Pemberton's face. Before they could prevent, he struggled to a sitting posture. "What!" — he gasped — "me — a Van Haaven — to be saved —" his voice, barely audible, tingled with scorn — "by a common carpenter?"

A gush of blood followed the words out of his mouth. He sank back. His eyes filmed. His jaw dropped. Pemberton Van Haaven was dead.

The doctor waited only to acquaint the other two of that fact. Then he departed, agitated and shocked beyond measure by the dying man's words.

Dusk had fallen. Shadows crowded about the quiet figure on the bed.

Willoughby drew a sheet over the face. Overwhelmed with compassion, he sank to his knees beside the bed. The viscount stood at the foot, his head bowed. The former said no definite word of prayer. It was as though pity and pleading ascended from his soul like a vapor — unexpressed — inchoate.

In a moment they rose and left the room, closing the door, gently, behind them. They passed down the stairs slowly, half abstractedly. They had lived in a new and tragic world for the last hour. It was difficult to adjust themselves to the old familiar one.

Willoughby paused, his hand on the knob of the library door. "I hardly know how to tell them," he said under his breath.

"Shall I?" suggested the viscount, sympathetically.

Willoughby shook his head. "It's my task," he returned. Opening the door he walked slowly into the room.

Aunt Edwina reclined on a sofa. She was evidently recovering from a faint. Bella bent over her with smelling salts and a fan. Aunt Harriet sat by the open window, her face buried in her handkerchief, her shoulders shaking. Allaine wandered nervously about the room. She was as pale as chalk. They had seen the doctor leav-

ing, and had implored him for the truth. Upset as he was, he had broken it to them — not too tactfully.

Bella had telephoned to Mr. Moriss, calling off the dinner engagement.

Willoughby sank down in the nearest chair. Aunt Harriet came over to him, trembling with emotion. "How did it happen?" she wailed. "How did it happen?"

Willoughby passed his hand wearily over his forehead. "When I went up, he was not in his room," he began monotonously. "Segby had dressed him for the dinner, and had gone downstairs, leaving him sitting in his room. I went down the hall calling him. I heard a slight noise in my bedroom. When I went in, he was standing before an open drawer of my bureau. One hand was behind him. I said, 'Coming down, Uncle?' Without answering my question, he commenced to talk so fast I could scarcely understand what he was saying. I came up close to him. He backed away into the hall, his hand still behind him. 'A lot of dirty, common, working people,' he cried out, 'in my apartments that I built for Society — *Society!* I won't have it! Do you hear?' I put out my hand, trying to lay it on his shoulder and soothe him. He must have thought I was going to restrain him in some way, for his hand flashed out from behind him, with a pistol. He fired pointblank at me, but it missed fire. The second shot went over my shoulder, as I dodged. The third —" Willoughby choked a little, "he turned on himself. I caught his hand and got the pistol away. I never dreamed he could resist me so! He shot himself through the chest." Willoughby looked somberly from face to face. "That's all, I believe."

The viscount had crossed the room at once to Allaine.

He took her cold little hands into his with a sympathizing pressure. He could not understand the look she gave him — so troubled — almost humble. Together they listened in silence to all Willoughby had to say. Then she turned to him, appealingly, and whispered something so low that he had to bend close to hear it. "I'm a worse match for you now than ever!"

He laid his finger on her lips. "No one — not even yourself, Allaine," he said, gravely, "will be allowed to speak slightly of my wife-to-be."

Allaine turned her face away. In her eyes he saw the glint of tears.

But there was much to do. He left her where she stood and, going to Willoughby, spoke earnestly with him.

It was not till much later that the women of the family were allowed to see the dead man. On the quiet face was an expression of a lofty resolve. The viscount marvelled at it, remembering the extraordinary remark with which Pemberton's snobbish soul flickered out. But after all, O'Neill reflected, Society was his ideal — the highest point to which his spirit could aspire. And the Molder of Souls asks no more of us than that we reach as high as we can. "He knoweth whereof we are made. He remembereth that we are but dust." Pemberton Van Haaven had died for his ideal. Could the best of us do more?

In spite of the vague and considerate finding of the coroner's inquest, the new family skeleton had escaped the closet. It was whispered about that Pemberton had committed suicide. The accounts in the daily papers, though decorous and dignified, were not convincing. "The revolver which Mr. Pemberton Van Haaven was cleaning" lacked the ring of truth, since everyone who

was acquainted with Pemberton knew him as the last one to bother with a pistol, and that if he had ever done so, he would not have stooped to the menial task of cleaning it! So they winked, knowingly, and said the usual things.

Then came the faintest whiff of a rumor to the ears of Belton, Sage and Company. It was to the effect that Pemberton Van Haaven had killed himself because he was not satisfied with the proposed disposal of the Kempton Block to certain parties for a philanthropic purpose. It struck a chill to Mr. Sage's thinly covered bones. Occupied with another important matter, he had not noticed the early return of Mr. and Mrs. Moriss — and he had been, therefore, quite oblivious to the subsequent proceedings. When he had found out all he wanted to know, he raged over the phone at Willoughby, making many unreasonable and even rude remarks. But the sale of the Royale Apartments was safe. Already the Van Haaven caravan was moving toward the city. The house was opened up and preparations for a very quiet family wedding were going on. The money stringency was over.

And it gave Willoughby the liveliest and most complete satisfaction to impress upon his two aunts and his sister the fact that the woman they had snubbed and despised was responsible for this felicitous ending of the long chapter of financial disaster. He might even have been accused of "rubbing it in." But, though they wriggled uncomfortably under the revelation, they bore it with becoming meekness.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Allaine abandoned her wedding pageant with the utmost reluctance. It is a strange contradiction that when shy maidenhood is wed, no publicity can be too blatant. On the contrary, the bridegroom who takes under his manly protection this timid young slip of femininity, is, for this occasion, at least, a very wood violet for modesty.

The viscount was relieved to dispense with the trumpets and shawms of the modern church wedding. But he sympathized sincerely with the disappointment of his bride-to-be. And he left her in no doubt of that sympathy. It made for a closer bond between them.

Even a quiet wedding is liable to achieve some ear-reaching rustle of its own. The only really quiet wedding is that which starts with the ladder under "her" window, and the watch-dog dosed. And such a wedding is, without doubt, a high and delicate compliment to the groom. For the girl who consents to an elopement — foregoeing orange blossoms and a long white veil — must be tremendously in love. With the conventional wedding one can never tell. It's such a triumphant ceremony, with all her bitterest friends looking on, that she's willing to take whatever comes along with it.

Holbroke was still in Canada. Lacking a best man, the viscount bethought him of an old acquaintance, an attaché of the British Embassy at Washington. This young man was only too glad to serve a college mate.

And it comforted Allaine not a little to have the gleam of a uniform at the simple, house ceremony.

After the fuss and flurry of the preceding weeks the bridegroom heaved a sigh of profound relief when, standing with his best man under the flowery wedding bell, he beheld Allaine advancing towards him. She looked like a naiad in a misty fountain, with her filmy white draperies. He stepped eagerly forward and took her from Willoughby's arm with an air that made several smile — but approvingly.

What followed was like the whirl of events in a dream. A few words, scarcely comprehended — responses murmured in a maze — the final astounding announcement, "I pronounce you man and wife" — the crowding around of black-clad relatives to pounce on Allaine and kiss her — the rising buzz of conversation — the subsequent banquet where one ate a medley of things without tasting them — the hurried departure for the ocean liner. It was all part and parcel of the feverish symptoms of the wedding, quiet or unquiet. The viscount was supremely glad when the last moment arrived, and he and the new Lady Castleton stood at the rail of the steamer looking down on the little group who had said farewell and only waited to wave the happy couple out of sight down the bay.

Bella and Willoughby lingered till the rest had made their exit from the gang plank. The latter wrung O'Neill's hand, warmly, almost — it seemed to Bella — sympathetically. Then, turning to Allaine, he stooped and kissed her in an awkward, unaccustomed fashion. It appeared to amuse his sister. Her eyes met Bella's, smilingly. She bent forward — suddenly grave.

"Good-by, Mrs. MacFallon," she said in a low tone.

"I've been horrid to you, I'm—" The intended word stuck in her throat. She had probably never used it before in that sense. She had been "sorry" when her plans went wrong, or when anything happened to her dearest friends. But never had she said or felt that she was "sorry" for anything she had done. Pride stood in the way.

But Bella was quick to understand what she meant, and she pressed the bride's hand with a sudden relief. Indeed, that one unfinished speech of Allaine's was the silver lining to the dark cloud of Hicks' marriage. She held it close to her heart and hoped against her fears for his ultimate happiness. He bent and kissed her in his warm affectionate way, and the tears welled into her eyes. His parting words rang pleasantly in her heart—"Remember! I'm going to be happy, Bella mia. Don't forget it for one minute."

She ran lightly down the gangway with Willoughby and stood on the dock till the hoarse, overmastering vibrations of the whistle made everything tremble.

And now they were off—a titled young man and his bride, in the full tide of youth and happiness. But if everything material has its spiritual similitude, Allaine's must have been that of a little child that puts its fingers confidently into the hand of the schoolmaster and follows him up into another class.

Meanwhile Bella was immersed in the new philanthropy. The whole machinery of the scheme was to be assembled, so to speak, and in good running order by the time the alterations were completed. Bella found Evelyn Copley a valuable assistant in choosing the house-mothers. In most cases it was give and take between the applicant and

the position. Mothers, who themselves mourned daughters — lonely waifs brooding over lost homes and parents — were the ones who were to come together and find happiness again.

Willoughby, too, was drawn into the scheme as adviser and co-worker. It helped to take his mind off the late tragedy which had shocked him painfully. The rest of the family were absorbed in getting back to the town house, away from the scene of the suicide and the nearest approach to bitter poverty they had ever known. Their money troubles were over for the present at least. That was an abiding comfort. The two old ladies dropped back into their own individual manner of life. They missed Allaine, little pleasure though she had been to them. Distance lent its inevitable enchantment. Her faults were forgotten in the glories of her new state. The two aunts knew a special joy in the mention of "My niece, Lady Castleton." Allaine wrote seldom — letters that sounded like Marconigrams, they were so short and dry. But the aunts peered close and read happiness between the lines.

The letters of the viscount to his cousin were hardly better. He detested letter writing. But Bella sensed a deep content in them, and sighed with relief even while she wondered.

It was during the first year of their marriage that the disastrous world-war broke out. The viscount was among the first to enlist — a private, and fighting side-by-side in the trenches with his own valet. So much Allaine's curt notes told them. Of herself she said little or nothing. It was one of Hicks' letters from the usual vague "somewhere in France" that gave the information

with ill-concealed pride, that Lady Castleton was serving her novitiate in a London hospital. Then a long silence, followed by the news that, after having escaped with hardly a scratch for months, O'Neill was wounded and on leave for a short time.

The aunts, like many other excellent people, didn't know "what the war was all about" and didn't care "which side won." But they sincerely hoped, that whether kingdoms trembled, and empires fell to dust, the viscount might emerge unscathed to continue to figure in their conversations as "my nephew Lord Castleton." And indeed their views were index to a very harmless brand of neutrality — a neutrality which none of their increasing number of friends grudged them.

But this was all very much in the future in the December immediately following Allaine's wedding. Willoughby urged Bella to hasten their own wedding, now that his affairs were in such good shape. But Bella had pledged herself to see the Royale Apartments through to working order before undertaking — so she told him, with a twinkle — the care of a husband. And Willoughby recognizing her firm resolve beneath the jest, resigned himself with what grace was his.

It was not till the middle of December that the great place was finished. The builders and carpenters took their tools and departed. Paperhangers came in their stead, and made the great place a wilderness of paper scraps and paste. Then they, too, disappeared, and the cleaners took charge. While this last process was going on, the little family groups went round and personally chose the furniture that was to go into each home. Mr. and Mrs. Moriss were determined that from first to last

the matter of individuality should be preserved — that the place should have no taint of the public institution about it. Each house-mother was allowed so much for furnishing. She had to make it do. And shopping and planning drew the members of each group together in the delights of home making, as perhaps nothing else could.

The house-mothers were paid a small salary. The girls were all workers and they would contribute to the comfort of the home just as they would have contributed in a home of their own. And they were to be as free in that home as girls could be — free of any rules except those laid down by their own house-mother, which varied in the different groups, as rules vary between homes the world over.

The Morisses had been, at one time, people of extremely moderate means. They understood the value of money, and they were careful not to provide too generously for the beneficiaries of their philanthropy. Each person, whether house-mother or girl, was supposed to do her share in the up-keep of her own special group. Nothing in the scheme should be a stumbling block to independence — so the Morisses decreed.

It was planned to have the house warming on Christmas Day. For a week the groups had been moving in, and they were practically settled. Bella was up to the eyes in the various plans for celebration. She was in all of the secrets. Willoughby complained that he had scarcely glimpsed her for a couple of weeks.

Then, as if someone had turned a kaleidoscope, it was Christmas Day. There was a light fall of snow in the early morning, just enough to make one remember it was winter.

When Bella and Willoughby drew up to the curb, the Moriss car was just behind. The four entered the great hall together.

It was full of happy people bustling about to do the last few things before the time of the celebration arrived. The place was festive with Christmas greens, and there was a snapping, crackling fire in the big fireplace. Outside, the garden was hidden under its dust of snow, making the cosy warmth of the hall more attractive by contrast.

The simple ceremonies were begun. The Kempton-Royale was duly presented to the united groups by Abner Moriss, in the name of his dear daughter, in a warm, almost affectionate speech, and accepted by the spokesman of the occasion, a white-haired matron. Then there was a little round-robin from the girls, given, with a Christmas wreath, to Mr. and Mrs. Moriss. After that, Mrs. Moriss herself, in a shy word or two, expressed her gratitude to Mrs. MacFallon for her help in the whole affair, and clasped a tiny diamond-studded watch on Bella's wrist as a memento of the work they had done together. And when the latter stooped and kissed the little old lady, without a word, being very much touched at the gift, the girls and house-mothers burst into sudden applause. And there was genuine love in the sound.

Christmas carols finished the formalities, sung by both girls and mothers gathered round the piano at the end of the hall. Then Bella and Willoughby slipped out to their waiting car and were whirled home to dinner. There were only the two aunts to celebrate the holiday together, for Cyril was dining out. Allaine's brilliant marriage had given him a decided "boost" toward the social heights

which were the haven of his desires. And he made the most of it.

The New Year approached with peculiar significance to Willoughby. Bella had consented to their marriage taking place on that day. If Allaine's wedding had been quiet, Bella's was to be a mere echo. Only a dozen of her friends were invited. When the day came, the indispensables amongst the Van Haaven relatives formed the larger part of the wedding party that sat in the church, described by Aunt Edwina as "modish," and waited for the bride.

The ceremony was soon over.

Two perfectly happy people walked down the long dim church aisle and, waiting only to receive the congratulations of the few guests, were whirled away to the station just in time to catch the train for the West. They had planned to spend the honeymoon in the summer land of California.

Later, as they sat watching the snowy landscape slide by, Bella laughed, amusedly, at something that occurred to her.

Willoughby smiled in sympathy. "What was it?" he asked.

"A little talk I had with Aunt Edwina," she answered. "Or rather, that she had with me. It really seems too bad to tell you, Billy, for she was so sweet to me and apologized so prettily for having supposed me to be common, ordinary clay."

"Which you are not!" Willoughby affirmed, promptly.

Bella disposed of his statement with a laughing gesture. After what Billy had said to her a few moments before, bending close and whispering fervently, it was not the

slightest use to contradict him. "Seriously, Billy, from what Aunt Edwina hinted, your people must have thought me a sort of bumboat woman, like dear little Buttercup in *Pinafore*. I do remember mentioning that there were steamers on the lake, and they jumped to the conclusion that Captain MacFallon was captain of one of them! So I explained to her that he was captain in the Coldstream Guards — which is a vastly different thing — and that he was considered one of the best matches, socially, in England when we were married. Poor fellow!" she added with a sigh. "He made ducks and drakes of his fortune and mine. I wonder if it will ever straighten out."

"But, dear Mrs. Van Haaven," he said, lingering over the name — it was the first time he had applied it to her since they were married, an hour before — "what particular need have you for money? Haven't I enough for both?"

Bella shook her head, smilingly. "A woman is always the better for an income of her very own," she averred. "Suppose," she continued, mischievously, "you should take to beating me, Billy, I could always buy a ticket and run away from you."

Willoughby looked thoughtful. "To be sure," he agreed. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Good boy!" Bella said, patting the hand nearest her. "You really begin to make friends with even a very poor joke, on sight."

"What else did Aunt Edwina say?" he asked.

Bella reflected. "She asked me why I had actually earned my living up north, and particularly, why I had earned it, in that dreadful way — in a public hotel."

Willoughby looked uncomfortable. "I don't approve," he told her, "of Aunt Edwina's catechising you in that inquisitorial way. Please accept my vicarious apology."

"I found it most amusing," Bella assured him merrily. "She was in such deadly earnest. So I told her that I couldn't have taught French — there was no one there to teach but the squirrels. I think she fancied I might have started a current events club or helped people set their dinner tables — which is quite correct, I believe, for 'decayed gentlewomen.' Some day we must take her up to Mipawan. It would be an experience for her."

"God forbid!" Willoughby ejaculated, piously.

CHAPTER XXIX

A fast motor boat cut through the water of the lake and left a tossing wake behind it. It rounded the last sharp curve of rock and drew up at the little dock.

"We're just on time," Bella said, as Willoughby helped her to alight.

"But the train isn't," Willoughby returned, with a glance down the empty track.

"I hope Allaine won't be too much bored with her visit," Bella remarked. "It's so quiet here."

"So it is," Willoughby agreed. "Heavenly quiet."

"Hicks will love it," she said. "But if Allaine doesn't, he won't stay. And I do so want to see him, the dear fellow! So long since they were married, yet it seems like a flash."

Willoughby stooped and put a couple of turns and a half hitch of the hawser over a post before he spoke. "A flash?" he echoed. "It's more like an eternity to me—a very joyous eternity."

Bella smiled in response, the quiet, contented smile he loved to see in her blue-brown eyes. "Listen!" she said.

Far down the track the whistle sounded—once—twice—

"Two people to dinner to-day," she announced, glancing toward the hotel. "Not a big contingent, even for Mipawan."

The engine came puffing round the curve and stopped, its nose almost in the lake. A couple of lumberjacks were

off and into the dining-room in a trice. A squaw descended from the car steps, a brown baby girl clinging shyly to her skirts. Last, the three they looked for—the viscount, Allaine and the little lad.

Allaine's cordial greeting surprised them both. Bella, in particular, felt some subtle change in her. She decided that motherhood was responsible for it. O'Neill was his own jolly self. He flung his arms about Bella and kissed her with hearty affection. Then, with the greatest possible pride, he turned his small son toward her by his little square shoulders. "This," he announced, "is the Honorable John Egmont O'Neill, at your pleasure!"

Bella stooped and shook hands with him. She felt instinctively that the Honorable John, who looked all Van Haaven, would tolerate no familiarities. And she was right. He acknowledged the introduction with grave friendliness. Then facing his father in the fragrant sawdust, he demanded with no accent of babyhood, "Where are the bears, Dad?"

O'Neill twinkled at Bella above his head. He looked about as if to detect a member of the genus *ursus* on the horizon. "Give me time, John," he said, seriously. "I'll make good on that proposition."

They piled into the boat in a happy picknicky mood. The luggage and retinue prepared to follow in another boat. Bella watched Allaine closely for symptoms of boredom. But the visitor was interested in everything as they speeded along the lovely, green shore. She seemed more human, more alive than the languid supercilious girl of the years before. Even Willoughby noticed a difference. Bella saw him look at his sister in pleasurable surprise. This was surely a brand new Allaine.



The Honorable John took to his Uncle Willoughby at once. The two solemnly made friends over the engine. It is doubtful if the youngster saw a foot of the wonderful scenery through which they were passing, so intent was he upon the machinery.

The boat swept around into a small bay and brought up at a rustic wharf.

"How beautiful!" Allaine exclaimed.

The white sand of the bay edged the virgin woods. From the wharf, a wide path led up through the sun-flecked shadow, to a gray, stone lodge, broad, low, and verandah-ed on all sides. It was in such perfect accord with its surroundings that it looked as if it had grown there along with the age-old trees and the gray boulders.

"And you call this 'roughing it,' do you!" Allaine exclaimed, delightedly, as they entered the house and looked about them at its perfect appointments.

"Well, as a matter of strict fact," Willoughby returned, "we don't. Sometimes we feel as if we had brought up too much civilization with us. Then we put on Jim-crow clothes, jump into a canoe, and take a trip without even a guide along. We go far up the lake and camp out in the bush somewhere. And after a week we're only too glad to get back to our transplanted New York."

"We actually had a visit from Cyril," Bella told Allaine.

"Yes, he said a word about it in a letter to me," Allaine observed. "Didn't he shoot something?"

Bella and Willoughby burst into laughter.

"I should say he did!" the latter responded. "He's one of the guide's stock stories by this time."

"Let's have it," the viscount begged.

"Well," Willoughby began, "Cyril took a notion he'd like to be a mighty hunter before the Lord. And in particular he wanted some heads to hang about in his new den. So he came up here with the most gorgeous hunting togs you ever laid eyes on. Any decent animal would have dropped dead at the sight of him! I got him the best guide in the district, Jim Holbein. And Cyril explained just what he wanted — a moose and a couple of deer, an eagle and a loon, and perhaps, if they had luck, a bear. But the moose was the principal thing. After they'd been out half a day, they struck the tracks of the biggest moose in the region. Jim had had his measure for months, and knew just where to find him. Cyril waited, gun in hand, as eager as a girl trysting with her sweetheart. Suddenly the moose broke bush in front of him. Cyril looked up and beheld it towering over him. Jim said he never saw a worse case of buck fever in his life. He shouted to Cyril to blaze away. But all Cyril did was to stand there, wobbling in the knees and jibbering softly to himself. Jim thought he was praying, but Cyril denied it, hotly, afterward. He said he was just saying how different it looked from what he'd expected! After a moment the moose backed away and was gone. Jim was mad, I guess, and he bawled out disgustedly, 'Ye wanted a moose, didn't ye?' And Cyril gulped out, 'Y-yes, but — good Lord! You didn't tell me it would be as big as a house!'"

"Good for Cyril!" the viscount laughed. "I hope he got one his size."

"He did," Bella replied, merrily. "He got the maniest, scrawniest specimen you ever saw! Jim was

ashamed to bring it home. But Cyril was as proud as St. George with the Dragon in tow. I never beheld anyone so elated."

"But poor Jim!" Willoughby added. "The other guides 'happened in' and squinted at the prize. And they twitted him so that he had to tell the whole story in self-defence."

"Not till Cyril had gone home, though," Bella put in.
"They're an honorable set, these guides."

* Later, when twilight began to overwhelm the day, they all sat together in a rustic pavilion which jutted out on the lake. It was exquisitely still, and, from time to time, the conversation dropped to silence as if the absence of sound were a sort of delicate music to be carefully listened to. They were all conscious of a deeper harmony amongst them than the last time they met. But no one mentioned it till after the Honorable John, on a signal from his mother, bade them good night and marched up to the house like a little soldier. Allaine watched him halfway up the path to where his nurse awaited him. After a moment, she excused herself and followed.

It was then that Bella said, half musingly, "What a wonderful change there is in Allaine! How did you bring it about, Hicks?"

The viscount smiled with pardonable pride in his wife. "Growth, growth, Bella mia," he returned. "From the bud to the lily. Life does that for all of us."

"But she's so democratic," Bella observed. "I noticed it at once. While we stood on the dock at Mipawan — perhaps you saw it — a little Indian babykins came along —"

"I know what you mean," Hicks interrupted, smiling.
"I saw it, too."

"And the Honorable-and-Only John went up," Bella continued, laughing, "and investigated the little brownie. Of course I expected Allaine to protest, though Gran' Louis' baby is a clean, tidy youngster. But instead she called out, 'That's an Indian baby, John. Isn't she a dear?'"

"That doesn't sound a bit like Allaine," Willoughby commented promptly.

The viscount cocked his white-clad feet up on the seat in front of him, and disposed his hands comfortably in the pockets of his white serge dinner coat. "That's easily accounted for," he assured him. "Three things came into her life and molded her as if she had been a lump of wax. She changed in the space of a few years, like a girl under a spell."

"Let's have the recipe," Willoughby demanded. "I don't know of anything I hate worse than a snob."

Hicks tucked his briar pipe full and hunted for a match. The momentary flame showed his face—his smiling mouth, his blue eyes full of content. "Well," he explained, "the winter we were married, there was a Hindoo in London lecturing — don't ask me to remember his name, please! It was something like Ramabei, or Hush-aby, or Bide-a-wee — He gave talks on Occultism. Allaine's dearest friend, Lady Pleydell, who's a high old democrat herself, by the way, insisted on having Allaine hear him. It seems the Hindoo put it like this: that souls were constantly being born and reborn into this earth life. And that sometimes they came as king — sometimes as peasant, according to their deeds and the particular things

they had to learn. And the Pundit put it that this life was like a mask ball, in which each acted his part disguised from all the rest. One might think he was conversing with a prince — but it would be only a boor in a rich dress. One might patronize a peasant, only to discover, later, that he was royalty itself."

"Romantic," Willoughby observed, "but I don't quite see the point."

"Well," the viscount continued, "my lady began to sit up and take notice — for the very first time in her life. I never saw her so absorbed in anything — so really interested. The new theory seemed to make life a sort of game to her. She went about pulling off people's masks, as it were — trying to guess who they really were. She began to take a really uncomfortable interest in all the people around her — the butcher, the baker, the candle-stick maker — It was sometimes downright funny!" The viscount threw back his head and laughed his big, two-sizes-too-large laugh, as something ludicrous occurred to him.

"Tell us," begged Bella, leaning toward him and smiling in sympathy. But he refused, staunch partner that he was, to reveal it.

"The following summer the war came up like a thundercloud, raining its lightnings on all the world. It happened that, as you know, my man and I volunteered within the week. Everybody was off, y' know," the viscount added, apologetically, as if excusing himself for some unaccountable eccentricity. "It seemed that Allaine took it extraordinarily hard. And her letters scared me silly about her. So I wrote to Lady Pleydell to beg her for God's sake to keep an eye on my little girl. And so she

did. The next thing I heard was that Allaine was doing her bit in the hospital. And she sent me the sweetest little picture of her in nurse's uniform. By Jove! you never saw anything so rippin'!"

O'Neill paused to ram down another pipeful with his thumb, and, as he lighted it, they saw his face transfigured with the recollection. "Well, that was all right — pictures and hospital work — but I wrote and told her she must stick to London — I wouldn't allow her to come any nearer to the hell-and-death we were in. There was plenty to do in England anyway, and I couldn't bear to have her see the things we saw every day. There were times — sitting tight in the trench — when the only way I kept sane was recitin' the multiplication table over and over, out loud, though I couldn't hear myself doin' it with the row both sides were kickin' up. But you know all this — I wrote you about it.

"One day we were makin' a charge and I s'pose I must have got in the way of a machine gun or so and they made me first cousin to a sieve. I flopped over and took the count right between the trenches." The viscount fingered, abstractedly, a deep scar that ran through the thick blonde thatch of his head almost a third of its breadth. He was silent a long time — so long that the lapping of the lake against the wharf sounded loud in the stillness.

"And then?" Bella prompted, softly.

"It was dark when I came to myself," the viscount went on. "My man, Robson, was kneeling beside me. He was tryin' to put my arm round his shoulder, so he could carry me in to our trench. It was the pain of the movement that waked me, for I had a hole through the elbow. He saw that in a moment, and laid me down, put a flask

to my lips, and we tried it again. But when he put me on my feet I toppled over — paralysed from the waist down from a wound in my back. At the same moment, the enemy's trench discovered us and began to pepper us — at random, of course, for they couldn't make us out very well."

Again O'Neill was silent. When he resumed it was in the hard dry voice of one who relates something that wrenches at his self-control. "Robson tried to drag me in, but a chance shot broke his arm. They kept on pumping it into us, sending up the dust in spatters all around us. A shot took me in the shoulder here, and drew a grunt out of me. I heard Robson breathe quick and deep. He lay down, deliberately, beside me. 'They shan't hit you again, sir!' he said, and with that he interposed his own body between me and the firing.

"I must have lost consciousness then, for the next thing I knew it was bright daylight, and I was in a little white bed in the hospital, stiff with bandages and feeling as if I hadn't a drop of blood left in me."

"And Robson?" Willoughby asked.

"They pulled Robson's dead body off me when they found us late that night. He had given his life for me." The viscount removed his hat and held it a long moment in silence.

"Well," he continued, briskly, "by some mistake I was listed as killed. And it seems that as soon as she heard of it, Allaine started out to hunt for what was left of me. And what she went through there at the front brought her face to face with life in the rough. It did for her what it did for many another little butterfly girl — the first of the war — made a woman of her. Of course they told her

all about me — and about poor Robson. And that night she was sitting beside me, her rough little hand in mine. She was pretty quiet, considering. But the few things she said — Jove!"

He turned to Willoughby. " You think you know your sister — but you don't!

" And you, Bella mia, you've never met Allaine. She's a stranger to you both. But I knew what she could be, granted the proper environment," he said, triumphantly. " I knew it at once!"

" You certainly seemed to have no illusions about Allaine the first time you spoke to me of her," Bella said, smiling ruefully in the dark at the remembrance of that gray day on the road and Hicks' astounding remarks to the accompaniment of twittering sparrows on the fence.

" Pretty raw summing up of her, wasn't it?" O'Neill admitted. " But my love made me see straight. It was as if I looked at Allaine through God's patient eyes and got a glimpse of her from dust to angel!"

" Well, you were saying —" Willoughby suggested, his prosaic mind on the story the viscount was telling.

" We noticed the change in her right away," Bella observed, " but we fancied it was motherhood that had caused it."

" What, motherhood!" O'Neill exclaimed, energetically. " Mere physical motherhood! — To make a change like this! Why most mothers can't see anything beyond their kiddie's fuzzy head! God bless them! The world doesn't spread out for them — it narrows down to their own flesh and blood. No! Allaine got a sudden revelation of something a dam' sight bigger — the warm

human bond that unites all the world — rich and poor — mighty and humble. She got an insight into God's Great Democracy, and she could never be the same again — no one could! She felt — and feels to this day — the debt she owed to poor Robson. The man who told her about it, says that she didn't say a word, but that she wept as a man weeps — big, slow tears, as if something squeezed them out of her very heart."

"Hm," Willoughby remarked, dubiously, "it doesn't sound like Allaine."

Hicks laughed, joyously. "Not like the Allaine *you* know," he agreed, "but exactly like the Allaine *I* know."

"I'm so glad!" Bella murmured, contentedly. "It's wonderful!"

"And then," O'Neill resumed, "the Honorable John joined the procession — he was the third ingredient — and he found a vastly different sort of mater waiting for him, than would have been the case had he come sooner. From the very first he has been, not only Allaine's own flesh and blood, the heir to a tolerable estate, and a few other things — but a little brother to the whole world — a man-to-be with a serious part to play."

"A very good thing," Willoughby commented, approvingly.

The viscount nodded. "Don't understand me to deny caste," he said. "That would show a total lack of observation. It's only the way one takes it that matters. And, by the way," he added, "with Allaine's entire consent, John is being brought up to be as democratic as the law allows."

The man beside him sighed prodigiously. "I wish,"

he observed, wandering from the subject, "that my parents had seen fit to give me a decent he-name like 'John,' instead of branding me 'Willoughby!'"

Hicks twinkled sympathetically. "It does sound like a sort of lace collar effect."

"If you want to win my gilt-edged regards," the owner of the torturing label went on, "just call me —"

"Bill," the viscount finished promptly. "Why, of course!"

They talked together awhile longer. Then O'Neill began to fidget and look in the direction of the house. "I believe I'll hunt up Allaine," he remarked, rising and dumping the ashes out of his pipe. "And by the way," he added with animation, "to-morrow I'll beat you over to that far point beyond the island. You can choose the weapons — paddles or flippers; canoes or swim."

They watched him stroll up the path, striated with moonbeams.

He sang as he went snatches of "School Days," a popular song of twenty years before.

Willoughby whistled it softly with him. Reaching out, he caught Bella's hand and swung it to and fro, as children swing hands walking along together.

The tune died away.

"I'm so glad —" Willoughby said, with his slow smile, "that in the big school of life, the Schoolmaster lets me sit at the desk with you!"

